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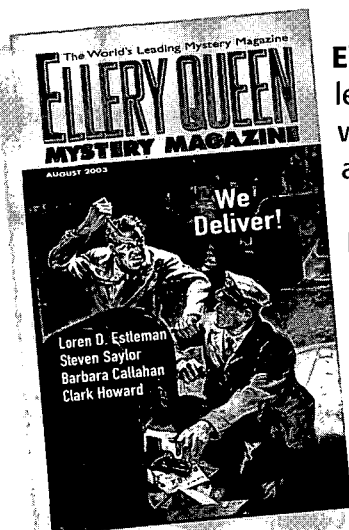
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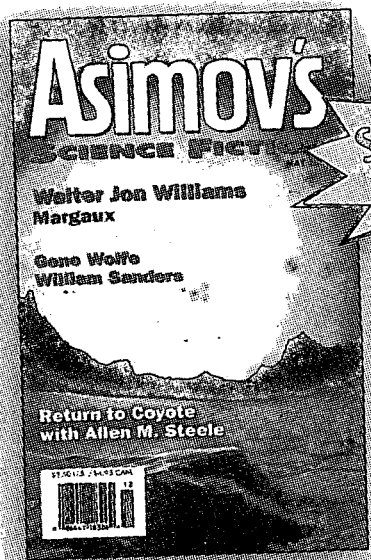
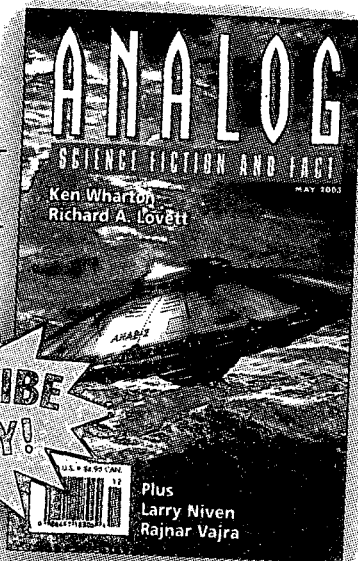
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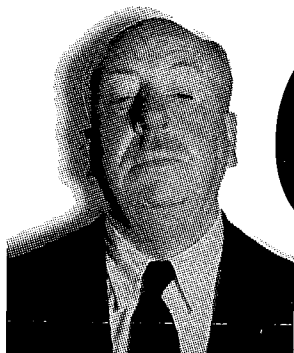
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# SEASON'S GREETINGS

FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM



Kelly Denato

**T**o celebrate the holiday season we bring you a new double issue, with even more stories by your favorite authors, including a Christmas tale by the late Lloyd Biggle, Jr. We also welcome two authors new to AHMM. Gigi Vernon is a reference librarian in upstate New York. She has published scholarly articles, but this is her first fiction in print. Alex Auswaks is the author of *A Trick of Diamonds* (1981). His Website, [www.crimebuff.com](http://www.crimebuff.com), is his "tribute to crime authors and readers."

# THE COLD YELLOW SEA

---

MARTIN LIMÓN

**F**reezing outside an Asian brothel in the middle of the night with a cold rain blowing in off the Yellow Sea is enough to make even the most dedicated investigator ponder the worth of a career in military law enforcement. Fabulous pay and benefits. Fun, travel, and adventure. Three hots and a cot. And if President Ford was to be believed, a raise that would bring my corporal's pay all the way up to four hundred and fifty dollars per month by the end of this fiscal year.

Wow.

The wet pellets slapping my face suddenly didn't sting so badly. Still, I shuffled deeper into the shadows beneath an overhanging eave.

My name is George Sueño. I'm an investigator for the Criminal Investigation Division of the 8th United States Army stationed in Seoul, Republic of Korea. Tonight my partner, Ernie Bascom, and I were after an M.P. gone bad. Last we heard, he was shackled up inside Building Number 36 in this maze of narrow alleys known as the Yellow House. Down the lane, light flickered out of large plate-glass windows. Behind those windows sat groups of Korean women in flimsy negligees, waiting for the foreign sailors who periodically invade this port known as Inchon on the western coast of Korea on the edge of the Yellow Sea. Merchant marines from all over the world—Greece, the Philippines, Japan, Holland, Sweden, and even the United States—are regular customers here.

The local U.S. military contingent is not huge. Just one transportation company that trucks supplies from the Port of Inchon to the capital city of Seoul and one platoon of Military Police to provide security for the duty-free shipments.

A door slammed. A tall, dark figure emerged from the foot of the stairwell just outside the glow of the plate-glass window. Then I saw someone behind him, a girl, bowing, telling him in a nice





way, Thanks for the money but now it's time for you to get lost. The tall man didn't acknowledge her farewell. He turned, shoved his hands into his pockets, and strode toward the alley.

As he passed the light of the big window I caught a glimpse of his face. Dark eyes, pug nose, heavy stubble of an eight-hour beard. Our quarry. The M.P. gone bad: Buck Sergeant Leñny Dubrovnik.

Ernie was on the other side of Building 36, making sure Dubrovnik didn't slip out the back. My .45 sat snugly in the shoulder holster beneath my armpit but I didn't expect to have to use it. Dubrovnik knew the deal. He was a G.I. in Korea. Once you're busted, there's nowhere to run. The peninsula is surrounded on three sides by choppy seas. The only land route, across the Demilitarized Zone, is guarded by four hundred thousand ROK soldiers on the south and seven hundred thousand Communist soldiers on the north. And all international ports of embarkation are monitored with a degree of efficiency that only a militarized police state can provide.

As Dubrovnik approached, I stepped out of the shadows, showing my badge.

"Hold it right there, Sarge," I said. "The game's up. Take your hands out of your pockets and assume the position."

Dubrovnik came to a halt on the flagstone steps, glanced at my badge and then at my face. His eyes seem baffled for a moment and then his lips began to curl.

"Alone?" he asked.

I should've told him I had a squad of M.P.'s lurking right around the corner. The least I should've told him was that Ernie would be here in a matter of seconds. But Dubrovnik was an M.P. himself and cops always claim that we can make any bust by ourselves. Backup's not necessary. So instead of telling him what I should've told him, that he had nowhere to run and I could claim the entire weight of the 8th United States Army as my backup, I made my first mistake of the evening: I let pride take over.

I looked Dubrovnik straight in the eye and shrugged. As if to say, Go ahead, Charlie, try it if you've got the nerve.

My shoulder had barely lowered when Dubrovnik turned and darted away.

I let out a yell. Incoherent, but I knew it would be enough to alert Ernie. And then I was running down the narrow pathway. Past the three- and four-story buildings that lined either side of the lane. Past the women sitting in the well-lit rooms behind the large windows, gazing out at us, their mouths half open.

Dubrovnik turned a corner. I skidded after him. Dubrovnik turned another corner, winding away from Building 36. The dis-

strict known as the Yellow House was actually about two city blocks square. The entire area was composed of one pedestrian alley turning into another, winding around like a maze, brothel upon brothel, no vehicles allowed.

Dubrovnik was fast and had the added incentive of knowing he was about to be locked up. Just when he was about to pull away from me, another figure leapt out of the darkness. Dubrovnik tried to dodge this new phantom but the shadow wrapped its arms around his shoulders.

Ernie.

How the hell had he gotten all the way over here? Then I remembered. Ernie knew the maze of the Yellow House probably as well as Dubrovnik did.

But Ernie's lunge was too high. Dubrovnik shoved it off and kept moving, turning and slapping at Ernie's grasping fingers. While they struggled I closed in, but Dubrovnik was gaining distance. And then Ernie and I were both panting down the alley, giving chase to the crooked M.P. who had now become a rabbit.

Dubrovnik darted into an open door.

As we crashed in after him I noticed the number atop the opening: 47. Each brothel in the Yellow House area was licensed and therefore numbered. We sprinted up the first flight of concrete block stairs into a foyer with varnished wood-slat flooring. Korean women stood around in various states of undress.

"Odi?" Ernie asked. Where?

One of them pointed toward a short flight of broad wooden steps that led down to the display area behind another plate-glass window. Dubrovnik must be around the corner. Trapped.

Before we could consult on the best way to take him, Ernie leapt down the flight of stairs. Sitting and squatting women screamed and scooted out of his way but before I could react, Dubrovnik exploded from behind a mother-of-pearl inlaid chest and landed a punch solidly on the back of Ernie's head.

Ernie's knees buckled, he reached for his neck, but he didn't go down. Dubrovnik swiveled, realizing that the man he had just punched wasn't the first man who'd been chasing him. When he saw me standing at the top of the flight of steps, his shoulders sagged and for a moment a look of resignation spread across his swarthy features. I smiled and reached for my handcuffs. But then Dubrovnik seemed to brighten, and before I could lunge forward he took a step backwards, stiffened his body, and leapt through the huge, gleaming, shimmering pane of glass.

Women screamed.

Amongst the hail of crystal shards which followed Dubrovnik into the alley, he somehow managed to roll upon impact. Like a circus acrobat, he bounded immediately to his feet. Once again he was off and running. By now Ernie had recovered and was already clawing his way toward the wicked-looking glass blades sticking up from the edge of the window. He was disoriented and I knew he'd hurt himself so I grabbed his shoulders and held him.

"What the hell you doing? He's getting away."

"Out the door," I said, "so we don't get cut."

Ernie let me drag him back to the main foyer and brace him as we descended the cement stairwell. When we reached the brick-paved alleyway, Dubrovnik was nowhere to be found. A few yards past Building 47, we asked a few of the women huddling in open doorways if they'd seen him but they argued amongst themselves and pointed in four different directions.

We'd lost him.

Our next stop was the home of someone who we suspected was Dubrovnik's accomplice. A clerk who worked at the U.S. Army's Port of Inchon Transportation Office. His name was Lee Ok-pyong, a Korean national. Although he worked for 8th Army, Lee fell squarely under the jurisdiction of the Korean National Police. Not us.

Technically, we shouldn't have been talking to him. Our original plan was to arrest Dubrovnik, interrogate him on compound, gather all the information we could, and then, accompanied by the Korean National Police, arrest Clerk Lee and assist in the KNP's interrogation. The more information we could gather first, the more productive that interrogation would be. But now, with Dubrovnik on the fly, our plan had changed.

"We shouldn't even be doing this," I told Ernie.

"Screw it. If Dubrovnik makes it over here and him and this guy Lee compare notes, they'll be able to get their stories straight. We'll never bust anybody."

The crime was diversion of U.S. Government property. PX property to be exact.

The way the scam worked was that Clerk Lee Ok-pyong filled out two bills of lading. One with the actual amount of imported scotch and cigarettes and stereo equipment to be delivered, and the other with a larger amount that would actually be loaded onto the truck. For security reasons, each truck was escorted by an armed American military policeman. But since both Dubrovnik and the Korean driver were in on the scam with Lee, there was nobody to complain about the phony paperwork.



Near the outskirts of Inchon, they would pull the truck into a secluded warehouse and unload the excess PX property. Then they'd continue on their merry way to the main PX in Seoul. Before leaving the Port of Inchon, each truckload was padlocked and sealed with a numbered aluminum tag. If the tag was tampered with, the receiving clerk on the other end of the line could tell. Supposedly, I wasn't sure if the receiving clerk was in on the scam or whether Dubrovnik had somehow managed to figure a way to reseal the load. That was one of the things we'd hoped to discover during his interrogation.

However they were doing it, the scam was working well and might have gone on forever if an audit in the States hadn't identified the discrepancy between what was being shipped to the Port of Inchon and what was actually arriving in the Main PX inventory. Once 8th Army CID was notified of the leakage, Ernie and I were given the assignment. A couple of days later we had figured out which M.P. and which driver were in on it. Finding the clerk who supplied the phony paperwork took a little longer but now we had him. Everything would've gone smoothly if Dubrovnik hadn't eluded us at the Yellow House.

The lane leading to the home of Lee Ok-pyong was not as well paved as the one leading to the Yellow House. A stone-lined gutter ran down the center of a muddy walkway. Brick and cement walls loomed over us on either side, most of them topped by barbed wire or shards of glass stuck into cement. If you don't protect yourself against thievery, the Koreans believe, you deserve to be robbed.

Using our flashlight, I found Lee's address etched into a wooden doorway: 175 bonji, 58 ho, in the Yonghyon District of the city of Inchon. A light glimmered behind the wall, flickering because of the still-falling rain. Ernie rang the doorbell. Two minutes later a door creaked open behind the wall and someone padded out in plastic slippers across the small courtyard.

When the gate opened a face stared out at us. Ernie tilted the beam of the flashlight. I could see that the face was beautiful.

She was a Korean woman in what must have been her late twenties. Her features were even and her skin was so smooth that I had to swallow before stammering out the lines I'd mentally rehearsed in Korean.

"Is Mr. Lee Ok-pyong in? We're here on official business."

"Who are you?" she asked.

As I answered I noticed that her hair was black and thickly luxurious and tied back by a red ribbon behind her oval-shaped face.

"We work on the American compound," I said. "It's important."

She opened the door a little wider. Ernie pushed past her, sloshed over flagstone steps, and slid back the oil-papered door that led into the *sarang-bang*, the front room of the home. A thin man with thick-lensed glasses looked up at us. He wore only a T-shirt and pajama bottoms and had been studying a ledger. A lit cigarette dangled from his lips.

"Mr. Lee Ok-pyong?" Ernie asked.

"Yes."

"With all the money you made ripping off foreign hooch, seems you could afford a better place than this dump."

I'm not sure if Clerk Lee understood, but without being invited in, Ernie slipped off his shoes and stepped up onto the warm vinyl floor. I followed. The beautiful woman stood by the open doorway, not sure if she should run and notify the police or if she should stand here by her husband.

"Your wife is very beautiful," Ernie said.

Clerk Lee was fully alert now. He sat upright and stubbed out his cigarette. "What do you want?"

"We want you to tell us about Dubrovnik," Ernie said. "Have you seen him tonight?"

"Who?"

"Sergeant Two," I said. That's what the other M.P.'s and the Koreans in the transportation unit called Dubrovnik rather than trying to pronounce his full name.

Clerk Lee's glasses started to cloud and the color drained from his face. His wife stepped into the room, knelt, and wrapped both arms around her husband's shoulders. She turned to us.

"Get out," she said in Korean. "No one wants you here. Get out!"

Ernie understood that.

"Fine," he said. "We'll get out. Just make sure you don't let any other G.I.'s in here tonight."

As we left, Mrs. Lee stared at us with the face of an ice goddess. Her husband looked as if he were about to vomit.

At this time of night, the local police station was a madhouse. The Korean National Police had arrested three prostitutes and two Greek sailors for drunk and disorderly. A fight at Whiskey Mary's we were told. They also had taken into custody one pickpocket and two fellows who'd tried to break into an old brick warehouse near the port.

"Busy?" I asked the Korean cop.

He looked at me as if I were nuts. Ernie and I both flashed our badges. In a few minutes we were talking to the night shift desk officer. We explained that we wanted Clerk Lee Ok-pyong taken into custody immediately, so he wouldn't be able to talk to his

cohort and thereby ruin our case against him. The khaki-clad officer listened patiently and when I was done he lifted his open palms off the top of his desk.

"Nobody," he said in English. "No cops."

Sure, he was short staffed but the real reason he didn't want to help us was that he didn't want to bust a fellow Korean without orders from on high. Who knew who the man was connected to?

Ernie argued with the desk officer for a while but finally gave up. When the Korean National Police don't want to do something, they don't do it. I pulled him out of there.

Outside, the night was completely dark. And the rain drifting in off the Yellow Sea was colder than ever.

The next morning, Ernie and I rose early from the warm *ondol* floor in the room we'd rented in the Yong Param Yoguan, the Dragon Wind Inn. After we washed and dressed and pushed through the double wooden exitway, Ernie said, "The place even smells like dragon wind."

"It was cheap," I said.

"So's pneumonia."

Without stopping anywhere for chow, we headed straight to the police station. This time the commander was in, and he introduced himself as Captain Peik Du-han. We shook hands.

"I understand you were in last night requesting an arrest," he said in English.

Briefly, I explained the situation to him. He nodded his head. His expression was calm, but I noticed that his fists were beginning to knot.

"*Kei-sikki*," he said finally. Born of a dog.

Ernie came alert at that. I speak Korean, at least conversationally. Ernie's vocabulary is limited mostly to cuss words. Captain Peik caught our alarmed expressions and said, "Not you. My duty officer last night. He should've listened to you. Or at least called me at home."

"Why?"

Captain Peik sighed heavily. Then he stood up and grabbed his cap off the top of his coat rack.

"Come on," he said. "I'll show you."

General Douglas MacArthur, floppy hat atop his head, corn-cob pipe gripped in his teeth, hands on his hips, stared out across an expanse of lawn and over a cliff that fell off into the misty expanse of the churning Yellow Sea.

"Doug, baby." Ernie slapped the back of MacArthur's shin.

South Korea is one of the few countries in the world, outside of the United States, to have located about the landscape statues of famous Americans. Up north at Freedom Bridge just south of the DMZ stands a statue of White Horse Harry Truman: In June of 1950, if he hadn't made the decision to fight to save South Korea, this country wouldn't exist today. MacArthur's contribution was the invasion of Inchon, cutting North Korean supply lines so U.S. forces could manage to break out of the Pusan Perimeter, retake Seoul, and push the North Korean Communists all the way north to the Yalu River, bordering China.

But Captain Peik hadn't brought us here to this place known as Jayu Gongyuan, Freedom Park, for a history lesson. While MacArthur stared thoughtfully at the Yellow Sea, Peik led us into the heavy brush beneath a line of elm trees.

"*Chosim*," he said.

I understood and managed to avoid the two mud-covered stone steps that led downward into the brush. Ernie hadn't understood and he stumbled over the hidden masonry. I caught him before he fell.

"*Chosim* means 'be careful,' " I told Ernie. "When are you going to start taking those Korean language classes on post?"

"When you stop bugging me about it."

Ernie pushed away my hand and straightened his jacket.

Some of the bushes in front of us had already been cleared and strips of white linen surrounded the area, the Korean indication of a place of death.

The body of Lee Ok-pyong lay in a muddy ditch.

"Shit," Ernie said.

Lee had changed out of his T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Now he wore slacks and an open-collar white shirt that had been spattered with dirt. His head had been bashed in with something long and heavy. All I could think of was an M.P.'s nightstick.

Blue-smocked technicians milled around the body. Ernie and I tried to think of something to say to one another, or something to say to Captain Peik, but there was nothing to be said. We'd screwed up royally this time. If only we'd collared Dubrovnik last night when we'd had our chance.

A KNP sedan pulled up to the edge of the park. Two officers climbed out and one of them held the back door open. A woman dressed in black emerged. Holding both her elbows, the two officers escorted the woman across the damp lawn. She kept her head bowed; a veil of black lace covered her face.



As they approached she glanced up at me, and even through the flimsy shroud I recognized the beautiful face of the wife of Clerk Lee. The look she gave me would have cooled hell by about twenty degrees.

Keeping her eyes on me, she navigated the stone steps with ease and then paused in front of the body and turned her attention to what lay before her. The escorting officers backed up and Captain Peik approached. He stood silently next to her for a few moments and then began to whisper soft words. When he finished, she nodded slowly. Captain Peik thanked her and the two officers escorted her back to the waiting sedan.

When she was gone, Captain Peik turned to us. "That's her husband, all right. She says he left the house shortly after midnight. Had to meet someone, she doesn't know who. Now, you fellows want to tell me what you know about this?"

We nodded and walked back to General MacArthur. As Ernie explained about Sergeant Dubrovnik and our screwup last night, I studied the granite statue and noticed that it even had shoelaces. Doug seemed to be listening to Ernie and Captain Peik. I strode across the expanse of lawn to the cliff and gazed down at foamy breakers crashing against rocks a hundred feet below. From here, I guessed I could throw something a quarter mile out into the Yellow Sea.

When I turned around, General MacArthur was staring at me, reading my thoughts.

Ernie and I caught hell back at 8th Army.

The Foreign Organization Employees Union had lodged a formal protest about our conduct. Harassing one of their employees at his home and later not protecting him when he went to his rendezvous with death. Of course, everyone assumed that Sergeant Dubrovnik was the man who had summoned Clerk Lee to the park overlooking the Yellow Sea and there proceeded to bludgeon him to death. Why had he done it? Maybe because Sergeant Two wanted to keep Clerk Lee quiet about the nefarious activities they had engaged in together. Maybe. More likely they had an argument. Maybe Clerk Lee threatened to rat Dubrovnik out. Right now we could only speculate. What we needed to do was catch Sergeant Dubrovnik.

Ernie and I checked with his M.P. company. The man hadn't shown up for morning formation, and according to the commanding officer, no one in the unit knew where he had disappeared to.

That remained to be seen. Ernie and I were about to start searching for Dubrovnik when the CID first sergeant pulled us aside.

"You're off the case," he told us. When Ernie started to protest, the first sergeant held up his palm. "Your first suspect escapes right from under your noses. And then your second suspect, a Korean national whom you shouldn't even have been messing with, turns up dead."

Ernie's face flushed red and he started to sputter.

"Keep your trap shut, Bascom," the first sergeant barked. "The provost marshal is still deciding whether or not to bring you two up on charges. A Status of Forces violation. Harassing a Korean civilian and misuse of your military police powers. Not to mention gross incompetence."

With that, we were assigned to the black market detail.

Two weeks passed by. Two weeks of watching Korean dependent housewives to make sure they didn't sell duty-free liquor or cigarettes down in the ville. Clerk Lee was buried, Sergeant Dubrovnik was still at large, and the provost marshal was still holding the threat of charges over our heads. Then we got the call.

Stiff found in the village of Songtan-up.

The corpse belonged to Sergeant Ivan Dubrovnik. He'd been shot once through the heart at close range, apparently with his own military police-issued .45 which was found beside him. He lay in a cobbled alleyway lined with nightclubs and beer halls and cheap room-rent-by-the-hour *yoguans* of Songtan-up, which served the five thousand or so U.S. airmen stationed at Osan Air Force Base. The sun was just rising above the rooftops of the two- and three-story buildings that surrounded us.

The Korean cop who'd found the corpse at two in the morning told us that no one in the neighborhood had heard or seen anything. Five hours more of canvassing the neighborhood didn't change that story. The security police at Osan classified Dubrovnik's death as a suicide.

Ernie didn't like it. Neither did I. The only other person who'd been involved in the plot was the driver who'd been long since locked up. He couldn't have been the killer. That left suicide.

And that also closed the case neatly. Now that justice had been done, the Foreign Organization Employees Union dropped their formal protest against Ernie and me. Everyone had suffered enough, they figured. The provost marshal put us back on regular duty status and signed off on the finding that no charges would be brought against us. Still, he kept us on the black market detail.

Dubrovnik's body was shipped back to the States. It was over.

All killings had been accounted for. Nothing left but to burn incense at their graves.

The blue silk of her dress hugged the curves of her body like wet paper clinging to a baby's cheek. Her face was a smooth oval with shining black eyes and full lips and I recognized her immediately. The wife of the late Lee Ok-pyong.

We stood at Gate 4 on the edge of 8th Army's Yongsan Compound near the district of Seoul known as Samgak-ji. She had asked the security guards at the gate to phone me at the CID headquarters. When I received the mysterious call I hurried out here.

Holding a black patent leather handbag in front of her waist, she nodded to me, sort of a half bow. Then she spoke in Korean, telling me that she wanted to talk.

Signing her on compound would be a hassle; she'd have to give up her Korean National Identification Card, and it would be a long walk back to the CID office. Instead, I gestured toward Samgak-ji. She nodded again and we strode about a half block down the road until we found a tea shop that was open. Once we were seated, she ordered *boli cha*, tea made from barley, and I ordered the more expensive ginseng version. The pigtailed teenage waitress brought us our drinks. When she left, I sipped my tea and waited for Mrs. Lee to begin.

She kept her head bowed for what seemed a long time. I spent the time admiring her. She was a goodlooking woman, a widow now, no children. Her perfume smelled of orchids. Probably, she'd be remarried in no time. But why had she come to visit me? Finally she spoke, using a measured and simple Korean that I could follow.

"I am sorry for having been angry with you. At the time, I blamed you and your friend for my husband's death. For having destroyed our tranquility. Now I realize that the fault was with this man Sergeant Two."

"Sergeant Dubrovnik," I said.

She nodded. "Yes. And also my husband was much to blame. He hoped to make enough money so we could go into business for ourselves. Maybe buy a little tea shop like this one." She looked around at the sturdy wooden furnishings, then turned her moist eyes back to mine. "But he wasn't a criminal. This was the first time he'd ever done anything like that."

I nodded. Waiting for her to tell me why she had come. Was it just to apologize for being rude to a cop? If I wasn't used to that, I'd have to get out of the business.

She lowered her head once again, thinking over what she would say next. "I have a job, on the American compound where my husband used to work. In the same office."

The Port of Incheon Transportation Office. That wasn't unusual. The Foreign Organization Employees Union is the most powerful union in the country. When one of their members dies an untimely death, they take steps to provide as best they can for the surviving family members. There's no welfare in Korea. No food stamps and no social security. The only thing the union can do is use its influence to land a job for an able-bodied member of the surviving family. In this case, Mrs. Lee herself.

A handkerchief emerged from her handbag and Mrs. Lee dabbed her eyes.

I knew it was coming now, the reason she'd gone to all the trouble to find me. I was prepared for a surprise, but this one took me completely off guard.

"I want you to meet with me," she said. "I want you to tell me everything about the case, about what happened to my husband."

"We can talk about that right here," I said.

"No. You have to get back to work and there are too many people around."

I studied the layout of the tea shop again to make sure I hadn't missed something. There were about a half dozen customers, two waitresses, and one young man behind the serving counter; none of them within earshot of our conversation.

She looked boldly into my eyes. "I want to meet you," she said. "So you and I can be alone."

I'm dumb but not that dumb. As coolly as I could, I agreed.

For the next two weeks, all my off-duty time was spent with the Widow Lee. She had to work in Incheon and I had to work about thirty miles away in Seoul. Some nights we met in between at a Korean-style inn with a warm *ondol* floor in the city of Kimpo right near the airport that services the capital city. We'd lie together and hear the big jets fly over us and listen to Korean music, and when we found time, eat Korean food. She seemed desperately in need of someone to be near her.

For me it was as if someone had lifted a weight off my shoulders. The weight of living in a world in which no one cared about me. Not personally. I was a soldier. Only that. A number on a military clerk's morning report. But now I was a person. A person who was close to someone who laughed when I was happy and shed tears when I was sad.



She taught me more Korean. Together we translated an ancient poem. It told of two lovers who were "as happy as two goldfish in a pond."

That was us.

She told me about her job. She filled out the bills of lading for the imported American goods that were transported from the Port of Inchon to the Main PX in Seoul. The same thing her husband had done. Gradually, she started to tell me of the mistakes her husband had made. Before she could go on, I changed the subject. I wanted to talk about the goldfish. The next time we met, she brought up her job again.

Ernie clicked his fingernail against my coffee cup.

"Wake up," he told me. "We have to go to work here in a minute and you're still sleeping."

We sat in the 8th Army snack bar on Yongsan Compound, wearing clean white shirts and ties and jackets, having one last cup of java before heading up the hill to the CID office to begin our regular workday.

"And you're developing bags under your eyes," Ernie continued. "The Widow Lee is putting you through one serious workout."

"Can it, Ernie."

"Oh. That much in love, are we?"

I pushed my coffee aside, placed both my hands on the small Formica covered table, and stared him straight in the eye. "So what if I am?"

Ernie's eyes widened and he leaned back. "Easy, pal. I didn't know you were taking this so seriously."

"Yeah. I've been taking it seriously. I've been taking her seriously. The last couple of weeks have been about the best couple of weeks of my life."

"Okay. Fine. So what's bothering you?"

"What's bothering me is that I don't know what to do."

"Hey, relax and enjoy it. Just don't get married."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

Ernie's eyes crinkled in puzzlement, something that doesn't happen to him much. He has the world figured out. Or at least he thinks he does.

"Then what are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm meeting her tonight at the same *yoguan* in Kimpo. Drive me out there in the jeep. Hang around. You'll see what I'm talking about."

Before he could ask more questions, I rose from the table, strode

out of the big, fogged-glass double doors of the snack bar, and marched up the hill to the CID office.

**T**hat night the Widow Lee and I went to the best restaurant in Kimpo. I ordered *kalbi*, marinated short ribs braised over an open charcoal fire. When we were finished, we walked arm in arm back to the *yoguan*. After we hung up our coats and relaxed, she pulled a wad of paperwork out of her purse. She sat next to me on the warm floor and held my hand and spoke earnestly to me for what must've been almost an hour. Most of what she said, I didn't listen to. The bills of lading she handed to me, those I did pay attention to. Duplicates. With differing amounts of product listed on each.

I guess I knew from the day out at Freedom Park overlooking the Yellow Sea. Maybe General MacArthur had made me aware of it. Or maybe it had been the hidden stone steps that Ernie and I had stumbled on, as had almost every Korean cop who approached the scene: She had breezed past as if they were an item of furniture in her front room. She'd been there before, and recently, to the murder site of her husband.

Sergeant Dubrovnik, an experienced M.P. and a man on the run for his life, had either shot himself in the ribs with his own .45 or he'd allowed someone he trusted to stand very close to him. Who else but a woman? And a woman he knew well?

And the job she'd received on compound. Sure, the union would work very hard to make sure that as a widow of one of their deceased members she found employment, but starting as a billing clerk? That was a relatively high-paying job that required extensive experience. The union usually gets people jobs at the lowest entry level, and the person who lands it is happy to get it. The work is steady, the benefits better than most jobs in Korea, and advancement will depend on how hard they work.

The Widow Lee had started near the top. Somebody, probably a man, had cleared the way for her.

And now me. I was next on her list. She'd learned from her husband's mistakes; Sergeant Dubrovnik, an M.P., was no longer in the picture, so a CID agent was her next step up.

I held the duplicated bills of lading in my hand. The proof I needed. Ernie was waiting in a nearby teahouse, the jeep outside. But could I do it?

Her eyes widened when I told her.

"A drive? Why should we go for a drive?"

"Because I say so." I ripped her coat off the peg in the wall and tossed it to her. "*Kapshida*," I said. Let's go.

She refused, so I slapped her once. Something I never do to a woman. But she was no longer a woman to me. She was a criminal.

At the police station in Inchon, Captain Rhee studied the bills of lading and listened patiently to my explanation. She wanted me to go into the scam with her. She had taken her husband's job and now I would take Sergeant Dubrovnik's place. And working in the CID headquarters, I'd be in even a better position to cover things up. Captain Rhee nodded, understanding what I said.

He held the Widow Lee overnight for questioning.

In a way I was proud of her. Captain Rhee told me later that she denied everything.

The Korean National Police went over the ground they'd covered before but this time they were asking different questions. Between the home of Lee Ok-pyong and the park overlooking the Yellow Sea, they canvassed residents who'd been out on the night Clerk Lee was murdered. Previously they'd said they hadn't seen two men walking together, one of them a Korean, the other an American. This time the police asked if they'd seen a Korean man walking with a woman. A few of them had. One of them, a sweet potato vendor, even mentioned that she'd seen the couple, deep in conversation, pass the statue of General MacArthur and disappear into the brush. Later, the woman had come out alone, stood by the sea for a moment and had then thrown something over the cliff. A stick maybe. Maybe a *mong-dungi*, a heavy club that women in Korea use to beat dirt out of wet clothing. Then the woman had hurried out of the park.

In Songtan-up, bar girls and local shop owners who had not noticed an American matching Sergeant Dubrovnik's description remembered a robust American G.I. walking arm in arm with a beautiful Korean woman. Both of them were strangers in these parts. They'd entered a narrow back alley and one of the bar girls assumed it was for a late night tryst. After only a minute or two, the woman had left alone, in a hurry, and the bar girl assumed that she'd changed her mind about her affection for the big G.I.

Had the bar girl heard a gunshot? No. The rock music blaring from the outside speakers that lined the narrow lane was much too loud.

Captain Rhee personally interviewed the local union leader. As an experienced cop, he knew enough to be circumspect in his questioning and didn't press the union overly hard. There was too much power involved. Too much chance for the union and therefore all

Korean employees to lose face. And, after all, how could you prove such an allegation? That a union leader had allowed a beautiful young widow to influence him and land her a better-than-average job. The union leader, however, was smart enough not to stonewall the Korean National Police completely. He confirmed to Captain Rhee that what he suspected, that the Widow Lee had received extraordinary assistance, was within the realm of possibility.

"You knew it was coming, didn't you?" Ernie asked me.

Once again we were sitting in the 8th Army snack bar on the morning after the Widow Lee was convicted of the murder of her husband and Sergeant Dubrovnik.

"I guess I knew. Somewhere. But I didn't want to know."

"I don't blame you." Ernie nibbled on his bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. "She was a goodlooking woman."

I sighed.

"Unlucky in love," Ernie said.

"You got that right."

"You could've gone along with the plan," Ernie told me. "Made some money for yourself. And you'd still have her."

I set my coffee down and looked into his green eyes. "I never thought of that."

"Sure you didn't," he said. 🐘

## CONVERSATION WITH

MARTIN LIMÓN

We are proud to have published Martin Limón's first short story, "A Coffin of Rice," set in ancient Korea, in June of 1990. Since then he has published 22 more stories with us and three highly regarded novels, *Jade Lady Burning*, *Slicky Boys*, and *Buddha's Money*. For more of our conversation with Mr. Limón, visit our Website, [TheMysteryPlace.com](http://TheMysteryPlace.com).

AHMM: Your last novel, *Buddha's Money*, came out in 1998. Is

there another outing in the works for Sueño and Bascom?

ML: George Sueño and Ernie Bascom are never far from my thoughts. They've appeared in over a dozen stories in AHMM and in three novels. Lately, they've been more insistent than usual and have dominated my thoughts completely. Every morning before dawn I've been working on a new extended story, set in Seoul in the early Seventies, and I am currently following the boys where they lead. To a publishable novel, I hope. I can't tell you much about

the story other than I'm having a ball writing it. Between bouts of anxiety, that is.

**AHMM:** What sparked your interest in writing and in Asian studies?

**ML:** I spent a total of ten years in Korea and during my sojourns back to the States people would ask me "Why do you like it so much?" My answers were awkward and even embarrassing. Still, the question bothered me. During my last military assignment at the Presidio of San Francisco, I bought a typewriter and decided to answer the question in depth. The result has been the George Sueño and Ernie Bascom stories.

The plots of my stories are fictional but every character, every scene, and every feeling comes directly from my experiences as a G.I. in Korea. I first arrived there in 1968 and I was completely overwhelmed by Asia. And overwhelmed by the clash of cultures between young American G.I.'s and a 4,000-year-old culture steeped in Confucianism. Later, I became an exchange student in Taiwan, studying Mandarin Chinese, and then I returned to Korea, studying the language and culture in earnest this time; all the while making formations and shining my boots and firing off rounds from a 105mm howitzer. I was never a Military Policeman but I observed the M.P.'s closely. I never knew when I was going to have to run away from them.

**AHMM:** You have written a historical novel that also takes place in Korea, but in the 16th century. Can you tell us about that book?

**ML:** King Sejong the Great was the third king of the Yi Dynasty and ruled Korea from 1418 to 1450 A.D. During his reign he set up meteorological stations to monitor rainfall, established funds to provide government subsidized loans to farmers, sponsored the invention of devices to measure earthquakes, and commissioned a group of scholars to produce the first scientifically designed phonetic alphabet in the world. All this while fighting off Manchu raiders in the north and Japanese pirates in the south. Arguably, Korea was at that time the most advanced nation in the world. King Sejong also sent out investigators to right wrongs and punish evil doers. The most exalted of these men wore a golden amulet around his neck signifying he was an Inspector of the rank of Five White Horses. That's where I come in, with an inspector, a trusty scribe, and an adventure that I hope will set the reader's hair on end. I've been working on it for a number of years. Whether or not it will ever see publication remains to be seen.

# THE CASE OF THE CHINESE SANTA CLAUS

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LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

**I**t had been a quiet Christmas Eve in Connaught Mews. Lady Sara attended church services with her mother, the Dowager Countess of Ranisford, and afterward returned to the Countess's home in Connaught Place for supper and a sedate Christmas Eve party with a few of the Countess's friends. Lady Sara's two footmen, Charles Tupper and Rick Allward, were spending the evening with their families in their own apartments, which were next door to Lady Sara's headquarters. All over London, families were gathered in anticipation of a joyful Christmas Day.

I had no family except my adoptive father, Old John Quick, who was Lady Sara's coachman. He had driven her and the Countess to church and then back to Connaught Place, after which, since Connaught Mews is just behind Connaught Place and a quick walk, she dismissed him. We exchanged our gifts when he returned home; then, since he'd had a long day taking Lady Sara through the ordeal of last-minute Christmas shopping, he decided to retire early. I busied myself in Lady Sara's office, bringing records of her extensive network of agents up to date.

Lady Sara returned home shortly after midnight. Neither of us had anything to report, so I wished her good night and was about to return to my own quarters next door when her door pull emitted a timid chime, almost as though it had decided to celebrate the arrival of Christmas Day in its own fashion.

Lady Sara and I exchanged questioning glances. "See what it is, Colin," she said, and added, "if it is anything." I opened the door. A bundle of clothing, noticeably smaller than adult-sized, flung



itself out of the cold night into my arms. I exclaimed, "Why, it's Madam Shing!"

The little Chinese woman was so elderly and small she looked like a shriveled monkey. She was panting in exhaustion, and her inscrutable face was, for once, scrutable. She was terrified. Lady Sara took charge of her and sent me to prepare hot tea. By the time I returned with it, she had helped Madam Shing to remove some of the robes that enveloped her, got her positioned comfortably on a sofa, and was massaging her arms and legs.

"Would you believe—she walked all the way!" Lady Sara exclaimed.

I echoed her astonishment. From Madam Shing's Chinese neighbourhood in the East End to Connaught Mews was between six and seven miles as the crow flies and much further than that following London's meandering streets, which no sensible crow would have attempted. On that frigid Christmas Eve, the woman had walked herself almost to death.

She kept trying to tell her story, and Lady Sara kept hushing her. "Have your tea first," she said. After a time she was able to sit up and sip the hot tea I had brought and even munch on a biscuit. The tenseness gradually oozed out of her, but she still looked terrified. Lady Sara watched her patiently, keeping her attention on the tea until she had finished a large cup.

Madam Shing had once been a valuable Limehouse agent. She had conscientiously roamed a large area and made herself an important source of information. She was a well-known and highly respected character among London's Orientals. Her innate dignity inspired a local rumour that the Dowager Empress of China was a distant connection of hers, and even Chinese who spoke no English called her "Madam Shing."

For the past few years, old age had curtailed her wanderings and failing eyesight blurred her observation. Now she rarely left the single room she lived in, and the last report we had from her had come several years before. A son in China sent her a small stipend, and Lady Sara made it possible for her to live comfortably by continuing to pay her ten shillings a month. Each month she had to be persuaded to accept it. She knew she was doing nothing to earn it. Whoever was acting as Lady Sara's paymaster would persuade her to take it on the grounds that something momentous might occur just outside her window, and she would once again become an invaluable source of information. Eventually she pretended to believe that and accepted the money.

Contrary to all of our expectations, something had happened,

and it had frightened her severely. When she finished her tea and indicated herself ready to talk, she croaked, "I was looking out of the window, and I saw it."

"Saw what?" Lady Sara prompted her.

"Man with ladder."

We waited.

She corrected herself. "Man with a long white beard and ladder. He put a ladder against the building and climbed up."

"The building across the street?" Lady Sara asked.

"Yes. Across the street."

"And what did he do then?"

"He opened the window and climbed in."

"Charlie Tang lives across the street," Lady Sara said. "Was it his window the man climbed into?"

"Yes. Charlie Tang's window."

"Were the Tangs at home?"

"No. Gone to Liverpool."

Charlie Tang had a brother in Liverpool who occupied a position similar to his in London. Both were leading merchants. Christmas was not a holiday among the East End Chinese except for the small community of Chinese Christians that patronised the Chinese Mission House run by the Reverend George Piercy. Both the Tangs had married English wives, however, and were thoroughly Westernised. They attended the Church of England, sent their bright, happy children to English schools, and associated with leading English merchants while maintaining all of their Chinese connections.

Obviously they were holding a family Christmas gathering in Liverpool, and if Madam Shing's sketchy description was to be believed, during Charlie Tang's absence someone had broken into his dwelling, which was above his shop.

That was as much as Madam Shing would say. Lady Sara questioned her at length, but she would not elaborate. She had described exactly what she had seen, or thought she had seen, and not a jot more: A man with a long white beard had placed a ladder against the building across the street and climbed into the first-storey window that was directly opposite to Madam Shing's own window.

"What sort of clothing was he wearing?" Lady Sara asked.

Madam Shing hadn't noticed anything special about his clothing. It was a cold night; she supposed he had a coat on.

"What happened to the ladder afterward?" Lady Sara wanted to know. "Was it still there when you left?"

Madam Shing gazed at her blankly. She hadn't given any further thought to the ladder. She hadn't looked out of her window again. As soon as she saw what was happening, she determined to tell Lady Sara about it. She bundled herself up, which took time, and when she reached the street the ladder was gone.

"When the man with the long white beard was climbing up, were there other men waiting at the foot of the ladder?" Lady Sara persisted.

Madam Shing had seen only the one man, the man who climbed the ladder. She watched him until he vanished through the window. It never occurred to her to look down at the street for other men, so she didn't know whether there were any. The one man had frightened her enough.

I was pouring another cup of tea for Madam Shing. She looked as though she still needed it. Lady Sara said, "Colin, would you awaken Rick and Charles? Also, John. Give them my apologies, but there is work to do."

That was as much instruction as she needed to give me. The fact that she asked for both of her footmen as well as her coachman indicated what she wanted done. She owned two taxi-cabs, a four wheeler and a hansom, for use in her investigations. One of the footmen would drive Madam Shing home. We couldn't allow her to walk back such a cruelly cold distance, and if we gave her money for a cab, she certainly would walk anyway and save it.

The other footman would be driven in the second cab by John, Lady Sara's coachman, so he could follow Madam Shing on foot if the need arose.

Madam Shing refused to elaborate her story a syllable beyond the bare bones of the facts she had already presented. Her voice was vibrant with truth and honesty—as it always had been when she reported to Lady Sara. We had never had a more reliable agent. This time, however, I had no intention of believing her until I had investigated every word carefully. Obviously Lady Sara felt the same way about it.

When the horses had been harnessed and the two cabs were ready—one of them was waiting out of sight—we bundled Madam Shing up again, Lady Sara gave her congratulations and thanks, added a few shillings to compensate her for her ordeal in walking so far in the cold, and assured her we would take action at once. I assisted her into the four wheeler Rick was driving, and she was whisked away. Rick was to take her directly home. As they turned into Edgeware Road, the hansom cab driven by Old John, with Charles as his passenger, hurried after them.

I returned to Lady Sara's office with her. She sat down at her desk; I took a chair nearby. I said, "I would like to be present when you relate to Chief Inspector Mewer this Christmas Eve tale about a man with a long white beard climbing a ladder in order to break into the residence of a prominent Chinese merchant. If I'm not mistaken, men with long white beards are supposed to be able to visit homes on Christmas Eve without breaking in."

"Do you believe her?" Lady Sara asked.

"I do not."

"Has she ever told us a lie before?"

"Not that I know of. She always has been painstakingly exact and truthful. However, she may be so far gone in senility as to be imagining things."

"That was a long way to walk on a cold night just to indulge her senile imagination."

"If she really did walk that far," I suggested.

"She certainly was cold and gasping for breath when she arrived," Lady Sara observed.

"She could have achieved that by walking from Gloucester Place," I pointed out. "After all, she is elderly." Gloucester Place was a mere three squares away.

"She knows me well," Lady Sara said. "Even in senility, I don't believe she would attempt to fob a complicated lie onto me. Nor would she walk so far to do it. Further, in all of my dealings with her, she always has been an exact and factual witness. Her objectivity has never been disturbed by a ripple of emotion. Yet suddenly she has become a different kind of person. Even so, I think we must assume there is *some* truth in what she told us. She had an experience tonight that was genuinely terrifying."

"I'm thinking about street lamps," I said. "Also about Madam Shing's poor eyesight. Large parts of the East End are not spectacularly well-lighted. West India Dock Road, in front of Charlie Tang's shop, could be called dim, and Madam Shing lives around the corner on a dark side street. Even on a dark night like tonight, her poor eyesight might conceivably have recognized the general shape of a man climbing a ladder, but I refuse to accept the beard."

Lady Sara shook her head. "I think we have to accept it. Madam Shing is not a person who can imagine things." She chuckled. "The beard may be the most important clue she gave to us despite the fact that it is Christmas Eve. But we don't have to believe she saw it from across the street."

"We also don't have to believe the burglar climbed in through a window," I said. "Charlie Tang is a very savvy merchant. He not

only would have locks on his windows, but he wouldn't traipse off to Liverpool without leaving a capable watchman on his premises. So I conclude that Madam Shing's story is largely fantasy."

"I have a more telling objection," Lady Sara said. "Consider this: She looks out, she sees a man with a ladder breaking into the dwelling across the street. She knows the dwelling's owner has gone to Liverpool. Does she bundle herself up and walk halfway across London to tell Lady Sara? She does not. She tells her landlord and her neighbours—people close by who can do something about it while the burglary is still in progress. Her conduct is more remarkable than her story.

"On the other hand, the bruises on her arms were real and recently acquired. She may have other bruises on her throat—did you notice how carefully she kept it covered? Someone misused her badly and—perhaps—threatened to do it again. That was why she was terrified. It will be interesting to find out whether she actually lets Rick take her home."

Rick Allward returned first with a strange tale to tell. When he reached Limehouse, workmen had part of the pavement up on Commercial Road near West India Dock Road. Traffic in both directions had to use a single, narrow lane alternately. He was trapped there for several minutes, and while he was waiting Madam Shing flung the door open and leaped out. She fell heavily, and he feared she had injured herself, but before he could climb down she scrambled to her feet and ran off faster than he would have thought possible. She darted out of sight down a side street.

Old John, driving Charles in the hansom several vehicles behind him, had seen what had happened. He skillfully maneuvered out of line and followed her. By the time Rick's turn came to move on, both hansom and fleeing woman were out of sight, so he returned to Connaught Mews.

Charles returned several hours later. Old John had overtaken the hurrying woman and driven past her like a cab driver on an urgent errand. He turned at the next corner, and Charles scrambled out. He had already outfitted himself with multiple disguises. He boldly strode back along the side street and met Madam Shing without giving her a glance. She hurried on; he turned, altered his appearance slightly, and followed her. The squalid neighbourhood just east of the Limehouse Basin of Regent's Canal contained a confused warren of streets. Obviously she knew it well. From her wanderings as Lady Sara's agent, she probably knew the entire East End well. She followed a zigzagging path

through the dark streets and marched unerringly to her destination, where she knocked, and was recognized the moment the door was opened, and made welcome. Evidently it was the home of friends.

Charles watched the house for some time. When it became obvious that everyone had gone to bed, he found the homes of two of Lady Sara's agents, roused them out—a considerable achievement on Christmas Eve—and established a watch on the house Madam Shing had fled to. Then he rendezvoused with Old John and returned home.

Lady Sara had one question for Charles. "Were there signs of anyone else trying to follow her?"

"None," Charles said confidently.

"She has found a refuge of her own choosing," Lady Sara said. "We can assume that she is in safe hands for the present. However, we may need her again, and I must know where she is. I'm sorry to spoil Christmas morning for you, but early tomorrow I want you to make arrangements to keep the house under watch day and night and follow her if she leaves. Find agents who know her well and will recognize her."

In the morning, Lady Sara left a message at Scotland Yard for Chief Inspector Mewer, informing him that she had a question for him and asking him to telephone her at his convenience. The message was relayed to him at home, and he left at once—on Christmas morning—to call on her. From past experience he knew all about the far-reaching implications Lady Sara's questions could have.

Once he heard Madam Shing's story, he reacted very much as I expected. He stared for a moment, mouth agape, as though he thought he hadn't heard Lady Sara correctly. "A man with a white beard broke into a house on Christmas Eve?" he demanded unbelievably.

"My question," Lady Sara said dryly, "was whether you have any information about internecine feuds among London's Chinese population."

"None," the Chief Inspector said. "They police themselves very effectively. They aren't like the American Chinese, where Tong wars seem to break out with monotonous regularity. We would stomp hard on them if there were any signs of that here. They know we would; that's why they are so careful to maintain order among themselves. Sometimes an individual rages out of control because of opium, or hashish, or that devil's blend of them, majoon, but few of those cases reach the police. His companions,



or the persons he bought the drugs from, take him in hand. What does this have to do with your bearded burglar?"

"I'll tell you when I find out," Lady Sara said. "Do you have such a thing as a Chinese constable on the force?"

The Chief Inspector paused to reflect. A police officer of his lofty rank couldn't be expected to know all the constables in London personally. "I'll have to ask," he said.

"Please do," Lady Sara said. "If you have one, I would like to borrow him for a day or two."

**T**here were very few Chinese policemen, but the Chief Inspector did manage to find one for Lady Sara. He was a young uniformed constable named Harry Kung, extremely polite as well as bright and alert. After he came to know us better, he confessed that his Chinese name was Kung Wu. We went with him directly to the emporium of Charlie Tang, which every London Chinaman knew well. It was the largest of its kind, occupying two connecting two-storey buildings on West India Dock Road. The front was splashed with Chinese characters. As I already mentioned, Tang and his large family lived above the shop. Tang dealt in every imaginable Chinese product that local residents could desire, imported directly from China: rare food delicacies; medicines and drugs, including pills for counteracting the effects of opium; soys, condiments, gingers, and curries; oil for sacred Chinese lamps; bars of a special soap that no English lady would have allowed into her house or even her barn; ravishing silks and finished clothing. Tang also sold such items of English origin as Oriental residents of London were likely to want or need.

A sign on the door announced, in Chinese characters, that Constable Kung translated for us, the days the shop would be temporarily closed.

"Of course he left someone to guard his home and shop during his absence," Lady Sara suggested.

"Naturally," Constable Kung said with a grin. "Charlie Tang was not—as you English say—born yesterday. In fact, he left his assistant, Wong Li."

"Do you know that to be a fact?" Lady Sara asked.

"Wong Li told me so himself. He had hoped for some free time to spend with his own family, but Charlie Tang promised him a few days off later if he would guard the shop and residence while the Tang family was gone."

"Excellent," Lady Sara said. "Perhaps this problem can be

resolved quickly. All we need to do is ask Wong Li if anything untoward happened last night."

Constable Kung tried the front door. To no one's surprise, it was locked. He knocked firmly; there was no response. We walked around to the street that ran alongside the building. On the opposite side was the building where Madam Shing paid an extra shilling a week so she could enjoy a front room. It was a shabby street, and the drab fronts of the buildings, mostly dwellings, were entirely unlike the bright, businesslike frontages we had just left. There were two side doors to Charlie Tang's building. One opened into his shop. Constable Kung knocked on it resoundingly; again there was no response.

We moved on to the other side door, which opened onto a stairway leading up to the Tang family's living quarters. When the family was at home, it would be left unlocked, and callers would knock or otherwise announce their presence at a second door at the top of the stairs. Now it was locked. Constable Kung knocked loudly.

There was no response.

He tried again. And again.

"Perhaps Wong Li stepped out for a few minutes," Lady Sara suggested.

Constable Kung shook his head. "He would not. He would have no reason to. Anything he might need or want is there in the shop. Besides, his employer left him to guard the establishment, and that is a sacred trust. We Chinese take such things seriously. No. He is there—either upstairs or in the shop. He must be there."

He tried again. Again, there was no response.

"Perhaps we should enquire of the neighbours whether Wong Li has been seen since the Tang family left," Lady Sara suggested.

As I already mentioned, Christmas was not widely celebrated by London's Chinese. The shop next door to Charlie Tang's was open for business. It was a cookshop, but my knowledge of Chinese customs was too inexact for me to determine whether the dozen customers we saw there were having late breakfasts or early lunches. What they were eating did not look appropriate to either occasion.

Constable Kung interviewed the proprietor, a muscular Chinaman of medium height wearing an apron that probably had at one time been white. After a jumbled exchange of Chinese—it sounded like a jumbled exchange—Kung turned to us. "Wong Li was left in charge of the premises. He would not leave them until Charlie Tang returned, so of course no one has seen him."

Lady Sara said thoughtfully, "All we really know is that Charlie

Tang *intended* to leave Wong Li in charge. We don't know that he actually did so. No one knows that he did so because no one has seen Wong Li since the Tang family left. Isn't that so?"

Harry Kung pushed his helmet back and scratched his head fretfully. To him, the fact that no one had seen Wong Li was proof that Wong Li was ensconced within his master's premises and overseeing them watchfully. He had difficulty grasping that this proposition had another side to it. If no one had seen Wong Li, perhaps Wong Li wasn't there.

Except that he had to be there. Wong Li himself had told Constable Kung that he would be there. Both he and his employer, Charlie Tang, had told others the same thing. The entire neighbourhood knew that Wong Li would oversee Charlie Tang's premises during the Tang family's absence. So he had to be there. But in that case, why didn't he answer the Constable's knocks?

Back we went for another try at the side door and then for a try at the front of the shop. The Constable's knocks became violent. There still was no response.

Three Lascárs, Indian seamen, came along the street. They were large, husky, dark-skinned men, and their size made both Constable Kung and me look like children. Asked in English about Charlie Tang and Wong Li, they gazed at the Constable silently for a moment, shrugged, and walked on. They would have their quarters somewhere nearby, perhaps a darkened room in a disused shop, crowded with beds, sofas, or even mattresses spread on the floor. They did not mind sleeping ten or twelve to a room. Probably they had done so all of their lives.

A middle-aged Chinese man followed them. Constable Kung discoursed briefly with him. He had heard that the Tang family would be away and that Wong Li would watch the shop. Beyond that, he knew nothing. He had not seen Wong Li, nor had he seen any sign of activity in the building since the Tangs left the previous morning.

A young Chinese man came along from the other direction. He was a tradesman of some sort; he wore an apron and carried a bag of tools. He did not live nearby. He knew who Charlie Tang was—everyone in the East End knew who Charlie Tang was—but he knew nothing about his plans for Christmas.

We walked along the side street for a short distance. I eyed Madam Shing's window and wondered just how much she could have seen on a dark night. Two young Chinese men—they both looked surly and disreputable—approached on the opposite side of the street. Constable Kung called something to them; they

answered, and suddenly he seemed excited. After another exchange, they crossed the street and joined us.

The Constable interrogated them at length before he bothered to translate. "They say," he said finally, "that they saw Wong Li early yesterday morning. He was arguing with Charlie Tang just outside the shop's side door. It was something about Wong Li staying to look after the shop, and both men were angry. Li wanted time at home like Charlie's other employees."

"How did it end?" Lady Sara asked.

"They don't know. It was none of their business. They were just walking past, and they kept on walking."

"It might be wise to write down their names and addresses just in case their testimony becomes important," Lady Sara said. "The next step would be to call at Wong Li's home and find out whether he is there. Do you know where he lives?"

The constable knew. We walked down the side street for a short distance to a shabby brick building that housed an odd, dusty shop dealing in amulets and charms on its ground floor. Wong Li, along with his wife and three small children, occupied a single second-storey room. His wife, a young, highly attractive Chinese woman, was bewildered at our questions. Li's employer had gone to Liverpool, and Li was guarding the premises during his absence. When the Tangs returned, Li was to have an entire week off, and they would go to the southwest of England where, she had heard, it was warmer. All that was agreed. Charlie Tang was a wonderful employer. No, he and Li never disagreed about anything. Li felt lucky to have such an employer.

This, rendered in Chinese and then translated, took some time. In the end, we had not advanced our knowledge except for establishing that Li was not at home and that the person who should have known him best, his wife, thought he was guarding the Tang premises.

Back we went to Charlie Tang's shop. "Madam Shing's story, along with the certainty that Wong Li is supposed to be here, suggest that drastic measures are in order," Lady Sara said. "Is there any legal way to break in?"

Constable Kung was shocked at the thought.

"Supposing a chief inspector ordered you to do it?" Lady Sara asked.

"Oh, well, if a chief inspector ordered it . . ."

"But I don't think we have come to that yet. Does anyone in the neighbourhood own a ladder?"

Constable Kung meditated, finally remembering one Samuel Godson, who washed windows for a living. He had customers all

across London, wealthy customers, and—for the East End—his was a profitable business. He owned several ladders that he and his employees used. We marched in a procession to the Godson home, which was located in a street that seemed like a veritable oasis amidst the general squalor of the East End. The houses adjoined each other in the usual crowded fashion. Like the buildings in nearby streets, they were old, run down, and in need of repairs, but here the four or five rooms of each house were occupied by a single family. The heads of the houses were tradesmen or small proprietors who were even able to afford a slavy—a young girl who performed the rough housework.

The days of such a street were numbered. Very soon—probably the moment their present leases expired—those single families would be replaced by people who would elevate rental values astronomically by their willingness to live with one or two families in a room. Thus the houses would bring in several times their present income, and the tradesmen and small proprietors would be forced to live elsewhere and probably settle for something far shoddier.

Sam Godson was celebrating Christmas with a houseful of children, his own and those of his employees. He was a plump, jolly, gregarious Englishman who was grateful to life for giving him his own business through which he was able to provide his family with necessities and even an occasional luxury. He knew Constable Kung, and he greeted Lady Sara with proper deference when the Constable introduced her.

Lady Sara proceeded to make the Godson family's Christmas far more joyous than the window washer had anticipated. She offered him a pound for the temporary rental of a horse, a cart, and a ladder long enough to reach Charlie Tang's first-storey windows. The family had been ready to sit down to their Christmas dinner, but in consideration of Lady Sara's status and the pound that had been offered, Mrs. Godson was willing to keep the dinner warm long enough for Sam to accompany us to his business premises—a shed in a mews behind the buildings in the next street—and outfit us with a horse (he had two), a cart (he also had two), and a ladder (he had half a dozen of various lengths). As window washing enterprises went, his was a large one, lavishly equipped, but neither horses, nor carts, nor ladders were very good. He had salvaged what he could, wherever he could. I made my own selection of a ladder, taking the best he had. I intended to climb it myself, and I didn't care to risk my life on one of the more rickety specimens.

I drove the cart back to Charlie Tang's premises. Constable Kung and Lady Sara walked and had no difficulty keeping up with Sam Godson's elderly, plodding horse.

When we reached Charlie Tang's place, I hired a boy to hold the horse for me. Then, with Constable Kung's assistance, I raised the heavy ladder to the window opposite the room occupied by Madam Shing. I climbed up cautiously, but the ladder proved sturdy enough. When I reached the top, I looked into a dimly lit bedroom. There was nothing Chinese about it. Clearly Tang's English wife had charge of the household furnishings. Otherwise, there was nothing of interest to be seen inside, but I busied myself for a few minutes with the window. Then, just in case Wong Li was somewhere out of sight either asleep or lying in a drunken stupor—though Constable Kung was indignant when I suggested this, which would have been a betrayal of Charlie Tang's trust—I knocked vigorously on the window. There was no response, so I descended.

I said to Lady Sara, "The window is locked securely, and no one has been meddling with it. Certainly no one has opened it recently from the outside. So much for the white-bearded burglar."

"Try the next window," she suggested.

It was all of twelve feet away, but perhaps Madam Shing had been so startled by what she saw that she got the window wrong. Constable Kung and I moved the ladder, and again I climbed it. It was another bedroom, this time obviously a children's room. It was as neatly English as the first bedroom and just as unoccupied. This window, too, had not been opened recently. I rained another fusillade of knocks on it before I descended.

"We might as well try all of the windows," Lady Sara said.

"Even those in front? Madam Shing could possibly have confused the two side windows, but she certainly couldn't see around the corner."

"Nevertheless, as long as we have the ladder . . ."

We moved around to the front of the building. Fortunately there was little traffic on West India Dock Road on Christmas Day. Constable Kung and I again raised the heavy ladder, and again I climbed it. This time I gazed into the Tang version of a sitting room. As before, the furnishings, as well as the look of the room, were typically English, and the room was as crowded with furniture and bric-a-brac as any middle-class English sitting room. There was a display of Chinese ornaments on one wall, but there was nothing un-English about that. Many middle-class English homes used items from India or the Orient to supply an exotic



touch. The well-padded chairs and sofa were what London's middle class thought London's upper classes were using, and the books and sheets of music on the new-looking upright piano that stood against a far wall suggested that the Tang children were being marched unwillingly to a piano teacher.

I took all of that in with a glance before directing my attention to a startling item that lay on the floor in the center of the room. It was a man in Chinese costume lying face down with the strangely carved handle of a dagger protruding from his back.

I didn't bother to rap on the window. Even from a distance of six or eight feet, I could see that the room's one occupant wasn't going to respond. I descended slowly, maintaining an unsuitable calm all the way. Then I described what I had seen.

"Was it Wong Li?" Constable Kung demanded.

"I have never met Wong Li," I said. "Even if I had, I wouldn't have recognized him, because this character is lying face down with his feet toward the window. Even so, on the basis of everything I have heard this morning, I think we now know why no one has seen Wong Li recently and why he didn't respond to our knocking."

Constable Kung climbed the ladder to assure himself that there really was a corpse there. Lady Sara was willing to take my word for it. She observed grimly, "This may be the result of a sordid squabble over drugs or a woman—the kind of thing that local police could be trusted to handle competently—but a murder on the premises of a leading Chinese merchant could have political implications, and that is ample reason for interrupting Chief Inspector Mewer's Christmas dinner." She went to find a telephone.

Scotland Yard took the discovery of a corpse in the sitting room of a leading Chinese merchant very seriously indeed. Not only did Chief Inspector Mewer leave his Christmas dinner to investigate, but he brought with him the head of the Criminal Investigation Department. Assistant Commissioner Edward Henry had been Inspector-General of the police in India. During that tenure, he developed a system of fingerprinting and used it with great success. Because of that, he had recently been made Assistant Commissioner and head of the CID, and he was in the process of establishing his fingerprinting system in England.

With them, arriving a few at a time, came a full platoon of members of the CID, also called from their Christmas dinners. Sam Godson's ladder came into far more use than we had anticipated as one officer after another, beginning with Chief Inspector

Mewer and Assistant Commissioner Henry, climbed the ladder to stare into the Tangs' sitting room.

Assistant Commissioner Henry coveted the dagger the moment he saw it. By that date fingerprints had enabled police to solve crimes and convict criminals with spectacular success in India and South America, but they still had not been used in England. Henry was patiently building his file and waiting for an opportunity. He sensed that one had arrived, and he issued strict orders that no one was to touch the dagger.

The police were waiting for a warrant that would give them authority to break into the premises. It promised to be a long wait. Magistrates were difficult to find on Christmas Day.

Lady Sara plucked at my sleeve and signalled to Constable Kung. "All of this police authority standing around and doing nothing will not advance our case an iota," she said to the Constable. "What we need right now are more witnesses to that argument between Charlie Tang and Wong Li. Will you see if you can find any?"

He hurried away. Lady Sara led me along West India Dock Road to the Chinese Mission House. It was a two-storey, white-painted brick building situated comfortably between a slop shop, an establishment selling used clothing and cheap sailors' togs, and a Chinese shop whose proprietor had an unlikely English name. The dazzling white front stood out starkly from the dark, weathered bricks of the buildings on either side. A sign in English across the top of the building read CHINESE MISSION. Above the door, four large Chinese characters probably proclaimed the same thing.

In the dim interior, the Reverend George Piercy seemed to be getting ready for a party. A table was laid for more than a score of guests. The fare was to be simple: tea, bread and butter, cakes, and biscuits. On the evenings of Sundays and holidays, Piercy was accustomed to entertaining young Chinamen who needed advice on personal problems or merely enjoyed the fellowship such a gathering supplied. He had lived for thirty years in China, and the London Chinese considered him their friend and adviser.

He was so slender he looked as though he had spent his life fasting. He was gentle and friendly, and he was instantly sympathetic to any problem. He greeted Lady Sara with a shy smile, got both of us seated, and asked how he could help us.

Lady Sara told him what had brought us to Limehouse and what we had discovered.

"Wong Li murdered?" Piercy exclaimed.

"The body won't be positively identified until the police obtain a warrant and force entrance to the building, but I think we can safely assume that it is Wong Li."

"How unspeakably sad! He has a wife and three young children—I must begin immediately to see what can be done for them."

"When the identification becomes official, we will need a sympathetic Chinese woman to carry the sad news to Mrs. Wong. I thought you would best know how to manage that."

"Yes. Of course. Please excuse me. I'll send for someone."

"Charlie Tang himself will be the principal suspect," Lady Sara told him when he returned. "Witnesses heard them quarrelling yesterday morning before the Tangs left."

"But that is totally unacceptable and impossible! They were both men of high character, and they held each other in the highest esteem! I would as soon believe that Her Majesty had stabbed her Prime Minister as believe that Charlie Tang and Wong Li would quarrel!"

"Nevertheless, I feel certain that Charlie Tang will be the principal suspect unless something is done quickly to counter that. I have doubts about this myself, and I need to know who else could have done it. Does Charlie Tang have any enemies?"

"Of course," Piercy said. "He is generous, he is kind, he is popular, and he is extremely successful. There are always some who envy the person who is any of those things, and he is all of them."

"Rival businessmen?" Lady Sara suggested.

"That would seem unlikely to me. They, also, are men of integrity."

"An employee of one of them thinking to do his employer a favour?"

"I suppose that is possible, but I would have difficulty believing it."

"An employee acting on a suggestion from his employer?"

"That is flatly impossible. All of Charlie Tang's principal rivals are successful men. They might envy him a little because he is a bit more successful than they are, but surely not to the point of involving him in murder!"

"Was he resented because he has an English wife and has adopted English ways?"

Piercy shook his head emphatically. "The Chinese are far from home. Chinese women are in short supply. It is so common for Chinese businessmen to take English wives that I would have difficulty understanding why Charlie Tang would be singled out." He smiled. "In my opinion, the Chinese are the East End's finest citizens. They also are far kinder and far more considerate to their wives and children than most English husbands. The

one thing that might have aroused enmity was Charlie Tang's crusade against the smoking of opium and majoon. He considered this destructive of many potentially fine young men, and he sponsored meetings to discuss the steps that should be taken to close those shoddy establishments that are misnamed 'opium parlours.' How that could have resulted in the murder of Wong Li, who surely had nothing to do with it, is more than I could say."

"Does a directory of those opium parlours exist?" Lady Sara asked.

"Not to my knowledge. Those who patronise them always know where they are—even the ones that change their addresses frequently. Of course, there are a few that occupy better premises and have their own special clientele. In their own fashion, they resemble the gentlemen's clubs in the West End. If you really want to know something about them, I can introduce you to a merchant who has a shop next door to one of them. He would be pleased to see it put out of business."

"That would be difficult as long as our laws permit it," Lady Sara said. "But I would like to meet him. Is there a Joss House in the East End?"

"Ah! There is much mystery as to whether a Chinese Joss House, or temple, exists here. The Chinese themselves say there is none, but they prefer to keep their own secrets, and they resent having their ancient customs ridiculed. If there is a Joss House, they would not even tell me about it."

Leaving a politely smiling Chinese youth in charge of the Mission, Piercy came with us to introduce Lady Sara to another Li, Chung Li, a well-known Chinese businessman.

Chung Li's establishment was not as extensive as Charlie Tang's. The building was smaller, and he offered only Chinese products. Much of his stock seemed to consist of foods and medicines imported from China. At Piercy's suggestion, he retired with us to a back room, and he and Piercy talked for a few minutes in hushed tones. Then Chung Li nodded. He was a plump, smiling Chinaman with a mouthful of gold teeth that he flashed at us repeatedly.

"I'll show them," he promised Piercy.

Having received our thanks, Piercy took his leave of us. Chung Li began an explanation, and at first, until we became accustomed to his elided R's, he was extremely difficult to understand. Eventually he made himself clear.

At one time the building that housed his shop had an addition-

al front entrance, a door between the shop and the opium establishment next door that opened on a stairway leading to the flat upstairs. The proprietor at that time also owned the building and ran the opium parlour as well as the shop. He liked to display merchandise on the pavement outside. Traffic to the crowded flat upstairs interfered with this, so he had an outside stairway built at the rear of the building, removed the front stairway, and bricked up the front entrance that had led to it.

This left him with a long, narrow room between his shop and the opium parlour. He used it for storage, but he also found another use for it. A platform was erected the full length of the wall, and holes bored through the wall, making it possible to spy into the opium parlour.

Chung Li thought the former proprietor had used it to identify the better class of opium patrons. When they arrived, often at night and always with their faces covered by a convenient scarf, it was difficult to recognise them. Once inside, they felt safe and removed their disguises. The occasional opium addict from high society, or politics, or the theatre, or any other form of public life who had the misfortune to be recognised, quickly became a black-mail victim.

Chung Li paid as little attention as possible to the opium parlour, but he was willing to show us the platform the previous owner had used for spying. Lady Sara, who already knew all about opium parlours from numerous interrogations of addicts, deferred to me, telling me to look for anything that might be useful to us.

I mounted a ladder to the long platform and gingerly made my way to the front of the building. There was no railing. I returned slowly, using the spyholes along the way. I failed to see how this would advance our case, but I had never visited an opium parlour, and I was curious.

There was nothing on display in the front windows, which were heavily curtained with a drab-looking material. The curtains concealed a nondescript shop with a counter and a few items like tobacco, cigars, and sweets offered for sale. On the counter was a small pair of scales. A young, bespectacled Chinese man sat behind the counter reading a book.

The back room was separated from the shop by a partition with a dingy yellow curtain in the doorway. This was the opium-smoking room, and I counted seven customers. The room was furnished with several comfortable chairs, two settees, and an odd wooden structure, a low platform that supported three large mattresses. The opium smokers had their purchases measured out for them

in the front of the store and then went to the rear to sit or recline comfortably while they smoked opium, or if majoon, the blend of opium, hemp, and hellebore, was their preference, smoked, chewed, or ate it.

It was a pernicious habit, and it couldn't be justified, as some tried to do, by the excuse that the user harmed only himself. Heads of families were destroyed; wives and children were left in poverty. Even so, I failed to see what connection it might have with the murder of Wong Li.

Chung Li was unable to tell us where other opium parlours were located. There were a number of them in the East End, he said, and they were easily identified by their curtained front windows, but he paid very little attention to them.

We returned to the emporium of Charlie Tang, where the congregation of police was drawing a crowd. The boy I had hired to hold the borrowed horse was still exercising patient diligence, and he flashed a smile when he saw me. He deduced, rightly, that his long ordeal would be properly rewarded.

Sam Godson had joined the bystanders to see what use we were making of his property. While I was talking with him, the warrant finally arrived. With it came a locksmith. The Chief Inspector had decided—in consideration of the corpse in the sitting room—that he was fully justified in breaking in, but because the premises were the property of a prominent and influential Chinese merchant, he thought it might be wise to do so with finesse.

When I looked around, Lady Sara had vanished. I finally located her in the middle of West India Dock Road headed diagonally across it, and I had to hurry to catch up with her. Facing the side street was a short row of shops. In one of them could be seen the tell-tale curtains that marked an opium parlour. It was the shop next door that she was headed for, however. One glance and I saw why. Above the door was the proprietor's name in English, W. Shing, accompanied by Chinese characters that probably said the same thing. I had been in the neighbourhood numerous times to call on Madam Shing, but I had never noticed that particular shop.

On the outside it was totally nondescript; on the inside, it was a fairyland. It was a shop offering Chinese objects made of brass—platters, bowls, tureens, goblets, beautifully fashioned art objects, gongs, bells, canisters, tea services, Buddhas of various sizes. Some of the items were wonderfully engraved. Some were genuine works of art.

But the contents were incidental, and the name of the propri-



etor—a common name among London's Chinese—could have been a coincidence. The thing about the shop that had seized Lady Sara's attention the moment she looked in that direction and now arrested mine was the proprietor himself. He stood in the doorway looking curiously at the confused intermingling of police and bystanders that surrounded Charlie Tang's shop. He was elderly, he wore an ornate Chinese hat and Chinese robes, and he had a long white beard.

For all I knew, white beards were commonplace among the elderly Chinese—one saw them often enough in the East End—but this one was interesting because of the owner's name and because he was located so conveniently close to Madam Shing's residence.

Lady Sara was playing the role of an innocent tourist. She admired the brass works of art, exclaiming with delight each time her gaze fell on something new. Finally she selected a small vase. She took it to the front of the store, where the light was better.

"Lovely," she exclaimed. "Let's see if it takes a polish." She went to work on it with a silk handkerchief, then held it up again. "Lovely. I'll take this." She smiled at the proprietor. "If it matches my decor, I'll need several more."

He bowed gracefully and took the vase from her with a smile. "It is a simple design," he said—his English was impeccable—"but one is less likely to tire of simplicity." He wrapped the vase in a piece of newspaper bearing Chinese characters and handed it to her. She paid him—a stiff price, it seemed to me, four pounds—and he accompanied us to the door.

He resumed his position in the doorway, again turning his attention to the chaos around Charlie Tang's shop. "What is happening?" he asked.

"During the night there was a report that Charlie Tang's residence had been broken into," Lady Sara said. "But there seems to be no sign of any disturbance, and all the doors and windows are locked. I don't know what the police are doing now."

"But where is Wong Li?" Mr. Shing asked. "He was to guard the store during his master's absence."

"The police say there doesn't seem to be anyone inside," Lady Sara said. "No one we have talked with has seen Wong Li recently. Have you?"

The old man meditated for a moment. "I saw him night before last—the night before his master left for Liverpool. I sometimes import small items of brass for Charlie, and I had just had a new shipment. I took him the twenty small Buddhas he had asked for.

Wong Li was there. He was always there during the hours the shop was open. I also presented Charlie with a bottle of sake, which is a Japanese liquor he is fond of, and the three of us, Charlie, Wong Li, and I, drank a toast to Charlie's trip." He smiled. "It was a very English occasion. But I can't believe there is no one inside the store. Charlie told me himself that Wong Li would stay there during his absence."

"Your English is excellent," Lady Sara said. "How long have you lived in England?"

"All my life," the old man said with a smile.

We thanked him, he thanked us, and we took our leave of him. As we walked back across West India Dock Road, I muttered to Lady Sara, "Just in case you are thinking you have found the white beard Madam Shing saw climbing a ladder, I'll remind you that she also thought she saw it climb through Charlie Tang's window, which certainly never happened. She would make an impossible witness."

"She will never be called as a witness for the simple reason that she didn't see anything."

"Didn't see—but she must have seen *something*! If she hadn't come to you last night, we wouldn't have found out that Wong Li was murdered. Do you mean she made it all up?"

"Not all of it," Lady Sara said. "The one accidental grain of truth in her testimony is what gave us our case."

"We have a case?"

"Yes. There are a few points that still need verification, but Assistant Commissioner Henry will take care of that for us."

The crowd was still gathered around Charlie Tang's shop, but the police were no longer in evidence. The locksmith had done his job, and the investigation had been moved inside. At the back of the shop we found Constable Kung with four more Chinese who had witnessed the quarrel between Charlie Tang and Wong Li. A police sergeant was taking down their testimony.

Chief Inspector Mewer loomed up suddenly in the dim interior of the shop. He said to Lady Sara, "You did a good piece of work." As was usually the case when he actually paid her a compliment, he sounded resentful. "Whenever we got to the next step, you had already taken it. Have you figured out how the Santa Claus with a ladder fits in?"

"I believe I have," Lady Sara said.

"He certainly didn't break into the house," the Chief Inspector said. "By last night, when he is supposed to have made his climb, Wong Li had been long dead. Everything indicates that he died shortly before the Tangs left yesterday morning. We

think we have things pretty much figured out. Wong Li resented being left to watch the shop. He and Charlie Tang quarrelled about that. Yesterday morning, shortly before the Tang family left, they were seen standing outside the side door arguing violently. Thanks to you, we have six witnesses to that. Tang and Wong Li went inside and resumed the quarrel there, and Tang stabbed Wong Li in the back with a dagger that had been displayed on the sitting room wall with an assortment of Chinese knickknacks. Charlie Tang had to leave almost at once with his family, so he left Wong Li's body lying there. But we've just learned that he intended to return alone tomorrow, leaving his family in Liverpool for several more days. Obviously he planned to dispose of the body before his family returned. We'll have an unpleasant Christmas surprise for him. He'll be arrested in Liverpool as soon as we can obtain another warrant. Can you improve on that?"

"I think I can," Lady Sara said. "Where is Assistant Commissioner Henry?"

"Upstairs with his fingerprint people," the Chief Inspector said. "Fingerprinting adds a lot of fuss to an investigation. Waste of time, I say."

"I say wait and see," Lady Sara said.

We climbed the stairs with the Chief Inspector clumping after us. The Assistant Commissioner met us at the top. "Almost finished," he announced.

"Were there fingerprints on the dagger?" Lady Sara asked.

"A lovely set."

"What do you intend to do with them?"

"We'll check our files. Unfortunately, the files aren't very extensive as yet. Probably we don't have the murderer there. But if we ever lay our hands on him for another offence, we'll have him for this murder as well."

"And if you never lay hands on him?" Lady Sara asked.

The Assistant Commissioner shrugged. "There are no shortcuts to law enforcement. Fingerprints have to be compared with the fingerprints of suspects or known offenders."

"Have you found a bottle of sake anywhere on the premises?" Lady Sara asked.

They looked at her strangely. No one had noticed.

"Look for it," Lady Sara said. "It should be here. But when you find it, don't touch it. Examine it first for fingerprints. I'm testing the reliability of a witness."

They found the bottle of sake and turned it over to Assistant

Commissioner Henry's fingerprinting crew. Only a small amount of the sake had been consumed—just about enough, I thought, for three men drinking a toast. Thus far, W. Shing had proved to be totally reliable.

Lady Sara next wanted to know whether there were twenty small brass Buddhas for sale in the shop downstairs. They were not to be touched. They, too, had to be checked for fingerprints and then counted.

The counting was done first. There were twenty, another point for W. Shing.

"Excellent!" Lady Sara said. "Now my case is complete." She handed the vase with its Chinese newspaper wrapping to Assistant Commissioner Henry. "Handle it carefully," she said. "On this vase, you will find the fingerprints of the murderer. You also should find them on the bottle of sake and on the Buddhas—perhaps along with the fingerprints of Wong Li. You will *not* find any fingerprints of Charlie Tang, which proves his innocence."

A perplexed group of police officers went to work on the vase. Lady Sara stepped around the corpse of Wong Li and took a seat in the sitting room. I joined her. She smiled at me.

"Are you hungry?"

"It just now occurred to me that I haven't eaten since early this morning. Yes, I'm hungry. Food is no further away than the cook-shop next door, but I would rather pass on that. I like to know what it is that I am eating."

"An excellent Christmas dinner will be waiting for us in Connaught Mews. I'm looking forward to it. Food always tastes better when one has just finished a good job of work."

Assistant Commissioner Henry joined us. He moved a chair toward us and sat down. Chief Inspector Mewer, who had trailed after him, remained standing. The Assistant Commissioner was experiencing a strangely subdued triumph. For the first time in the history of English criminal investigation, he had used fingerprints to identify a murderer, but he had no notion at all as to the murderer's identity.

"Who is it?" he asked.

Lady Sara pursed her lips thoughtfully. "There probably are several hundred hiding places in this neighbourhood for a Chinese refugee. It might be wise to arrest him quickly before he knows he's a suspect. Here is what you should do."

We watched from the window. The elderly shopkeeper was still standing in his doorway looking in the direction of Charlie

Tang's shop. A detective in street clothing strolled over and engaged him in conversation. He was asking questions about the meeting with Charlie Tang and Wong Li that the Chinaman had told Lady Sara and me about. Another detective joined them. Then a third. Lady Sara had estimated that three would be enough. They were. The old man was seized before he quite knew what was happening.

"But what was the motive?" Chief Inspector Mewer demanded. "They weren't business rivals. There is almost nothing in common between the two shops."

"The shop next door to Mr. Shing's is an opium parlour," Lady Sara said. "Shing operates them both. The brass shop is his labour of love. The opium parlour is his bank—he probably makes huge profits. Charlie Tang was crusading against opium parlours. The motive was as simple as that. The case, however, is extremely complicated. If you will call at Connaught Mews this evening, I'll be glad to expound it for you. Right now, Colin and I are hungry."

She expounded the case for me over our Christmas dinner. "Mr. Shing felt he had to do something to stop Charlie Tang's anti-opium crusade. He decided that murdering Charlie would be too dangerous. The murder of a mere employee of Charlie's would be far less risky. If Wong Li's murder could be arranged so that the obtuse English police would think Charlie did it, Mr. Shing's problem would be solved.

"Since he has lived in England all of his life, he certainly knows a great deal about police procedures and the way the English justice system works. First there had to be a motive. Witnesses were provided who would swear they saw Charlie Tang and Wong Li quarrelling just before the Tang family left yesterday morning. Those witness probably did walk past at exactly the time they said they did. Of course they actually saw nothing. Their testimony was supplied by Mr. Shing.

"Immediately after the Tang family left, Mr. Shing called on Wong Li. He brought with him the twenty Buddhas he claimed Charlie Tang had asked him to order. Whether Charlie actually did so is unimportant. Probably he did occasionally obtain brass items through Mr. Shing, and the order seemed reasonable enough to Wong Li. Wong Li accepted the Buddhas.

"Or perhaps Mr. Shing never mentioned the Buddhas to Wong Li. He placed them in the shop himself after the murder. One thing we can be certain about is that Mr. Shing took the bottle of sake with him when he called. Perhaps it was Wong Li who was

fond of the Japanese liquor. Mr. Shing presented the bottle and suggested that they drink a toast—to anything at all, maybe the English Christmas. They did so in the Tang sitting room, and when Wong Li left the room for a moment, Mr. Shing took the dagger from the wall and used it at the first opportunity after Wong Li returned. Being thorough, he may have poured out one more toast from the sake bottle to make sure the police would believe his tale of three toasts.

"Then he left, locking the shop after him with Wong Li's keys, which you may be certain he quickly disposed of where they will never be found.

"He had set the stage perfectly. Witnesses would claim to have seen Charlie Tang and Wong Li quarrelling. Wong Li was murdered shortly after that, and the police would think Charlie Tang did it before he and his family departed and then locked both shop and living quarters with his own keys when he left.

"Mr. Shing has the temperament of an artist, and the case he constructed was artistically complete. His downfall came because he assumed that Charlie Tang's morals were similar to his own. That night it suddenly occurred to him, to his horror, that when Charlie Tang returned from Liverpool and found himself confronted with Wong Li's corpse, he would simply get rid of it. Charlie Tang has a reputation of being a very sharp individual. He would know that a dead employee could cause him endless inconvenience. Further, the Chinese distrust the police and try to do their own policing. Charlie Tang would deftly dispose of the corpse and perform his own investigation, which might prove highly dangerous to Mr. Shing.

"This is what Mr. Shing would have done, and he assumed that Charlie Tang would do the same. He decided that he must somehow let the police know about the murder before Charlie Tang returned. But now there was no way anyone else could get into the house to discover Wong Li's body.

"Then he remembered Madam Shing, who perhaps is a relative of his. He has lived in the neighbourhood longer than she has—long enough to know all about her—including the fact that she once was an agent for the Lady Detective who works with the police. So he called on her and asked her to go at once to the Lady Detective and tell her she had seen a man climb a ladder and break into Charlie Tang's residence. Madam Shing would have no part of such a prevarication. Just as Wong Li felt that the responsibility for his master's property was a sacred trust, Madam Shing would have felt that truth was a sacred

trust in her relation with me. She flatly refused. So Mr. Shing used force—remember the bruises on her arms and perhaps on her throat—and finally terrified her so with fear for her life that she consented. He or one of his employees certainly took her most of the way in a cab and then followed her all the way to my door.

"So she arrived in a panic and told me what he wanted her to—but she added the one touch of truth that destroyed all of his plans. When she described the man climbing the ladder, she put Mr. Shing's beard on him. Probably she did it without thinking because the beard had terrified her and was foremost in her thoughts. Then, when I arranged to have her taken home, she pretended to go willingly, but she knew Mr. Shing would be waiting for her if she failed. At the first opportunity, she escaped to friends who would protect her."

"You keep saying she won't be called as a witness, but she is the only one who can connect Mr. Shing with the murder," I said.

"Mr. Shing's fingerprints connect him with the murder. Madam Shing won't be called unless the police should decide to charge Mr. Shing with assault—but why would they bother? A murder charge is inclusive enough, and as I told you, she didn't see anything. No one climbed a ladder, and she probably was asleep when Mr. Shing called on her.

"As for Mr. Shing, no Oriental would talk as confidentially to a stranger as he did to me in describing that touching scene where he drank toasts with Charlie Tang and Wong Li. It was information important to the case against Charlie Tang, and he wanted to make certain the police got it. Why did he confide in an Anglo-Saxon woman who was merely browsing for knickknacks in his shop? Because he knew who I was. He had terrified Madam Shing into calling on me and telling his lie for him—he knew the ploy had worked, because it got both me and the police there—and he wanted to make further use of me. He didn't realize, when he told me that little tale about drinking a toast, that I was hearing it as a confession." 🐦



# SECONDHAND HEART

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DOUG ALLYN

**S**ome nights I dream of toasters. An endless assembly line of 1955 Sunbeam T-35's snakes through my sleep. Each one pristine. Chrome gleaming. Brand spanking new. Thousands of toasters.

Millions.

Then the new starts to wear off. Pinheads of rust discolor the chrome. The toasters look tired. Used. Secondhand.

Suddenly the assembly line veers and the toasters start spilling off the end, tumbling down into a landfill, down and down into a bottomless black pit . . .

And I snap awake! Wide-eyed, panting. Scanning the room for . . . I don't know what. Something horrible. Death, maybe.

But no one's ever there. Only me. Alone.

So I fall back to my pillow. But not to sleep. Instead I begin the deep breathing exercises they taught me in the hospital, slowing my hammering heartbeat. Willing myself to calm down.

Just make it through the night. A few more hours. How hard can that be?

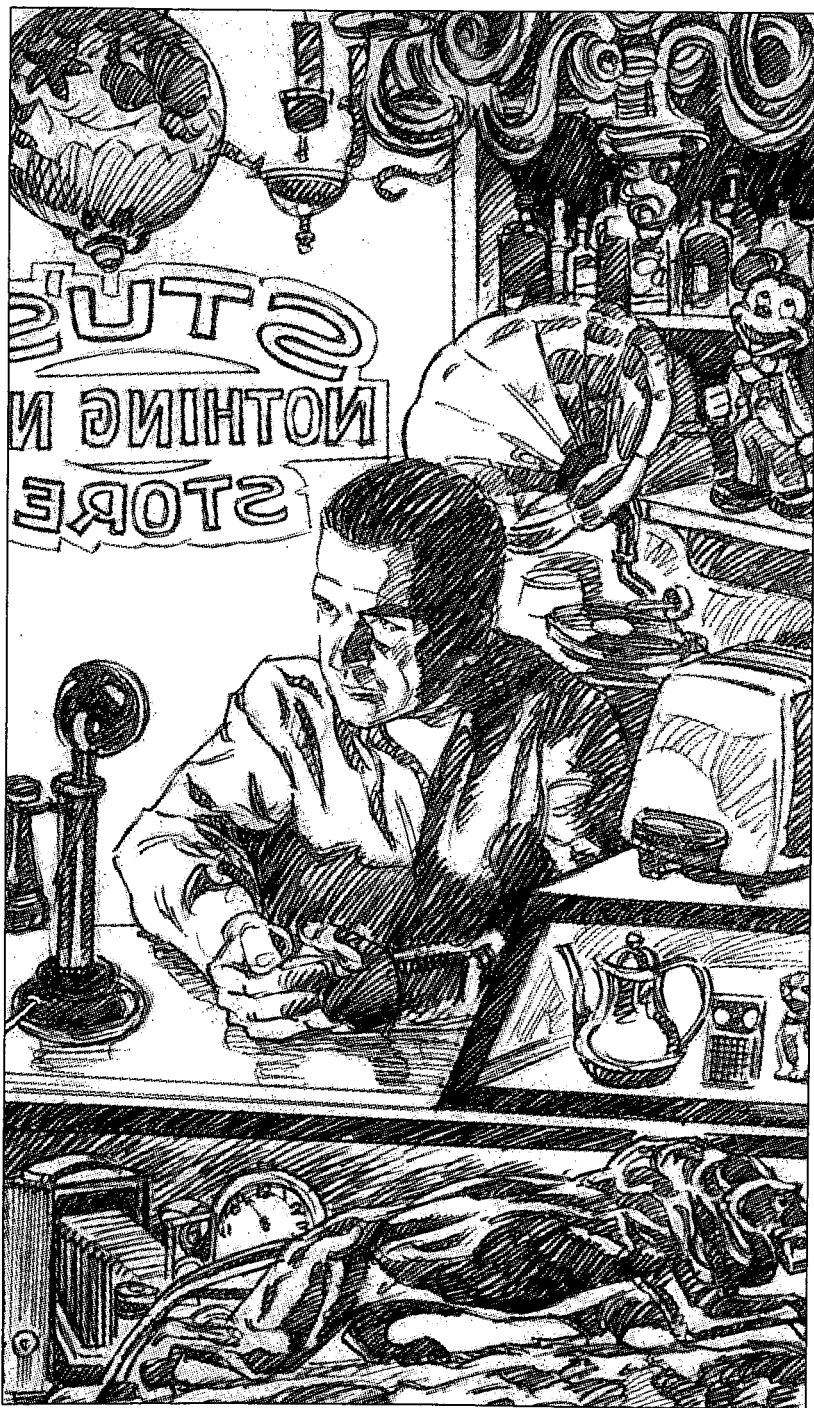
Very hard, sometimes.

My bedroom helps. The room is softly lit. I never sleep in the dark anymore. Every stick of furniture is familiar. It took me months of scrounging to find them all. A fifties' vintage McCobb six-drawer maple bureau, a Maloof day bed, cast-iron Laurel lamps with white mushroom shades.

In mint condition the furnishings might be worth five or six grand, but they aren't museum pieces. I live with them.

Everything I own is secondhand. By choice.

Secondhand means that other people once chose these things, too. Bought them, enjoyed them. So in a small way, I feel connected to their lives, to their happiness. It's the only connection I have now. Strictly secondhand.



Most people like new things. They buy new cars. Their cups all match. Their curtains color-complement their carpets and the art on their walls.

On garbage day, armies of empty cardboard boxes from Sears or Marshall Field's line their curbs. Treasures mingling with the trash. A 1964 Eureka upright vacuum, a Plycraft bar stool.

Thank God for those people. If American consumers didn't keep ditching their old stuff to buy new stuff, there wouldn't be nearly as much cool secondhand stuff for the rest of us.

Secondhand goods are more than my obsession. They're my business now. Stu's Nothing New Store. The Right Stuff at the Right Price. It's not what I planned for my life. But it's the right thing. For now.

My shop shares a block with a half dozen similar stores, Needful Things, Clara's Classic Collectibles, L'Attitude, in Bay Harbor's Oldtown district near the Saginaw River. Tourists flock here in the summer, but in November it's quieter. Waiting for winter.

Owning a secondhand store isn't like running a supermarket. You can't order stock from a catalog and salesmen don't call.

Occasionally civilians bring in things to sell. I seldom buy. Can't afford to. The *Antiques Roadshow* has everyone convinced that their mismatched saltshakers are worth umpty millions. They don't want a fair price. They want me to save their lives. I can't. I'm barely clinging to my own.

My store is a mixed bag, vintage furniture, lamps, and appliances. Useful things whether you're into antiques or not. I keep it stocked by scanning the classifieds, shopping the sales. Hunting and gathering. A Neanderthal in chinos and deck shoes.

Moving sales are my favorites, especially when Grandma's bailing out for Florida. Decades of stuff priced to sell quick, cash on the barrelhead, no gouging, everybody's happy.

Estate sales have similar goods but they can be a downer when they're run by grieving widows. Or surly relatives who were counting on a really big bequest from Uncle Ernie.

Garage sales are great if they're actually in a garage and you arrive early enough.

Rummage sales depend on the sponsors. The richer the church, the better the stuff. Sometimes people donate valuable things just to prove they can.

Dead last on my list, or anyone's list, are execution sales. The bill collector's last resort. Cops slap a lien on your stuff and auction it off. But since people only bid dimes on the dollar, a poor bastard can lose everything he owns and still owe bigtime.

The goods at execution sales are usually a notch above trash. If a guy's busted flat, how much good stuff can he have?

When I first opened my store, my father-in-law steered some city business my way. Execution sales. Whoopee. It was like running an estate sale with the corpse moping around. Looking sadly over your shoulder as you price tag his stuff. Appraising the value of his life. For a quick sale.

Never again. I'd rather backstroke across Saginaw Bay with a skunk stapled to my forehead. But you don't always get to choose your poison. Sometimes life just serves it up.

A biker blew into my store on a blustery November afternoon. Didn't glance at my stock, strode straight to the counter. Big guy, faded jeans, leather vest, tattooed arms, ratty beard.

"You own this place?"

"More or less. Can I help you?"

"Do you buy stuff?"

"Sometimes. What kind of—"

"I got all kinds. Furniture, appliances, plates. All old."

"How old? Older than you, or—"

"Older than your grandma, pal. I'm in this ol' wreck of a house and we're gettin' evicted by the damn city. I gotta sell everything off. You interested or not?"

"I can take a look, sure. No promises."

"I can't spend promises anyway. Bring cash." He gave me an address on Centralia, an older section of town. I said I'd stop by after supper. Almost didn't go. I didn't like the look of . . . whatever his name was. He hadn't mentioned it.

Wreck of a house was an understatement. Tudor style, complete with parapets and matching towers, three stories, Civil War era, maybe older. Hadn't seen paint since the Depression.

There was something familiar about it. Couldn't think what. Since my accident I have a lot of memories like that. Fragments. Images with no sense of time or place. Remembering my past is like watching a slide show of someone else's summer vacation.

Then it hit me. The Addams Family TV show. Morticia and Uncle Fester would feel right at home in this dump.

Lurch answered the doorbell. My biker host, looking even edgier than before. At least I wasn't alone. Half the dealers from Oldtown were already inside.

Marta Cohen from L'Attitude was prowling through piles of odds and ends in the living room. Squared off and surly in black denims, combat boots, and a muscle shirt, I figured Marta could probably stomp Lurch in a fair fight. Or an unfair one.

I said hi but Marta ignored me, lost in the hunt. She already had a stack of stuff set aside, a couple of dusty cameras, a Western Electric wall phone, ashtrays, a storm lantern with a cracked chimney.

Ted Sorensen from *Needful Things* was there too, gawky as a stork in horn-rims and a red Mr. Rogers cardigan. The only shopper I didn't recognize was a pert, dark woman with a curly mop and Mediterranean features, bustling cheerfully through the stacks like a puppy at play.

Obviously nothing interesting would be around for long. I began working the room. The goods were an odd mix. A K-Mart card table, particle-board serving trays, the kind of crapola Lurch would own. But some of the pieces were much older. A previous tenant, maybe.

I zeroed in on a 1920 Starck Victrola in the corner. Beat Ted Sorenson to it by a step. A little rough, but the motor still worked and there were spare needles in the cup. Perfect for a restorer. No price on it, or on anything else.

I glanced the question at the biker.

"Pick what you want, we'll settle up at the end, okay? Don't worry, I'll make it work. Got no choice."

Fair enough. I found a few more things, a painted bookcase, possibly Roycroft but more likely a copy; a child's school slate; and a pair of Bean Patrolman handcuffs. I was almost ready to check out when I spotted a pop case of what looked like file cards. A closer look proved a lot more interesting. Three-inch plastic disks ringed with thumbnail-sized slides. View-Master reels, very early from the look of them. They weren't even labeled.

"I noticed those." The short, dark woman was at my shoulder. "What are they?"

"Slide reels, probably for a View-Master, the little binocular type viewers that give a 3-D effect?"

"Oh, I remember them. TV cartoon slides, right?"

"Only the ones made after 1960. Before that they had all kinds of things on them, street scenes, travelogues, even old movie stills. I'm not sure what these are, they aren't labeled, but I know a dealer who loves this stuff."

"You're Stuart Kenyon, aren't you? From Stu's Nothing New?"

"That's right. I'm sorry, should I know you?"

"Not yet. I'm Karla Frantzis. Clara Pattakos is my cousin. Clara's Classic Collectibles? I'm buying Clara's business."

"Welcome to the asylum. How do you like it so far?"

"I love antiques and love managing the shop but I've got a lot to

learn. Thanks for the tip on View-Master slides. Next time I'll beat you to them."

"No good deed goes unpunished."

A quick smile transformed her face from interesting to . . . even more interesting. A good smile. "Ain't it the truth," she said. "Any other free tips?"

"That little box of glass slides? They're negatives for a stereopticon, the View-Masters of the nineteenth century. I don't carry them myself but I know Clara has a few. Don't pay more than twenty bucks for the lot."

"Thanks, I won't. I'll let you get back to scrounging. See you around, Stu's Nothing New."

Parking the case of stereopticon negatives with her stash, Karla returned to the stack of LPs she'd been sorting through. I finished my hunt without finding anything else worthwhile. I waved Lurch over to my little hoard. He was jumpy as a cricket on a hotplate, eyes shifting restlessly. Worried, or wired on uppers. Maybe both.

"These are the things I'm interested in. How much?"

"Man, I got no clue what this crap's worth. What'll you gimme for it?"

I did some mental arithmetic. "Thirty-five bucks for the Victrola, ten each for the bookcase and cuffs, five each for the drum and the slateboard. This box of reels might be worth a hundred or nothing at all. I'll gamble a twenty on them. I make it . . . eighty-five bucks total."

"That old record player ought to be worth more than a lousy thirty-five."

"To a collector, maybe. Not to me."

"Okay, okay," he said, scowling. "You sure you don't want nothing else? It's all gotta go tonight."

"Is there anything I haven't seen? In the basement? Or maybe the garage?"

"The what?"

"The garage. Any old tools or—"

"Forget the damn garage!" he snapped. "Just gimme my money and clear the hell out!"

His reaction caught me by surprise. Lurch definitely needed to tweak his medication. But I let it pass. "No problem." I counted out the cash. Several dealers glanced up at the edge in Lurch's tone, gazelles startled by a lion's cough.

"I'll give you a hand carrying it out, Stu," Ted Sorenson offered. The others went back to browsing. It would take more than a growl to drive them off. That's why lions stay sleek.



Ted and I lugged the heavy Starck Victrola out to my van and eased it carefully inside. Lurch followed us out, glowering from the porch.

"Our host seems a bit jumpy," Ted said. "Maybe he's been seeing Potter's ghost."

"Who?"

"Jerome Potter. He used to have a photography studio in this house. It was a beautiful home then. I had all my school pictures taken here. Most kids did back in the day. Potter committed suicide in . . . can't recall. Thirty-odd years ago. Hanged himself here. Somewhere upstairs, I think. A real shocker at the time. Rich guy comes back to his hometown just to kill himself."

"Back from where?"

"I don't know. He'd been away a few years. Maybe Florida. My memory's not what it used to be."

"Mine either," I smiled.

"No, I guess not," he said, glancing quickly at the half-moon scar on my forehead. "Sorry, Stu, I wasn't thinking."

"Forget it. I already have. Thanks for the help, Ted."

Climbing into my truck, I fired it up and let it idle a few minutes, warming it gently. It's a Corvan, a mint-condition 1966 Chevy Greenbrier, rear engine, air cooled. The American Porsche of delivery vans.

But as I shifted into reverse, I noticed Lurch, still on the porch, staring. He watched me all the way out of the drive. And into the street.

My visit to Lurch's lair wasn't pleasant but it turned out to be profitable. Checking my card file the next morning, I found an inquiry note about Victrolas, called the number, and sold the Starck sight unseen for triple what I paid for it.

Mamie Szmanski, a View-Master buff from Midland, agreed to take the box of untitled reels off my hands at two bucks a pop with a right of return for any she couldn't use.

Packing up Mamie's box for UPS I found a couple of glass stereopticon negatives mixed in with the reels. Ghostly images, barely more than line drawings, echoes from a past we can't even imagine.

One of the slides caught my eye. The face of a boy staring up at me. His life probably played out and ended before I was born. But even in reverse black and white there was something haunting about his image. I put it in a desk drawer, out of sight. I have enough ghosts of my own.

A few customers came in and I was up roughly six hundred



bucks before noon. All in all, not a bad morning for November.

My father-in-law, Phil Barrett, dropped by with lunch. Nothing elaborate, a couple of sandwiches from Subway. I furnished the coffee, custom-ground Colombian beans brewed in a fifties-era graniteware coffeepot with the original Bakelite knob.

Phil brings in lunch a couple of times a week. A duty, I think. A courtesy to my late wife. He's a nice man, big as a bear, six-two, two-fifty, an amiable giant, quick with a joke or a story. Phil's also a decorated Vietnam vet who built a small machine shop into a booming auto parts business and made a ton of money in the process. A two-term mayor of Bay Harbor, he's presently sitting on the city council.

I mention this because Phil never does. He'd rather hear your story than tell you his. A rare quality. Especially in a politician.

He stuck by me after the auto accident that killed my wife and almost turned me into an eggplant. When doctors suggested it might be time to pull the plug on me, Phil not only refused, he made sure I got the best care available and covered the financial gaps in my health insurance.

He truly treated me like a blood son when he could just as easily have walked away. After all, we aren't actually related by marriage anymore. Only by a funeral.

Sometimes I wish he would walk away. Since the accident, my memory is shaky. Tiffany and I were married nearly seven years, but I can only remember a few days of it, scuffling days, when we were living together at U of M, scraping by.

I have pictures of her, of course, but that's all they are to me. Photographs. I can't remember when they were taken, or where. Or what our lives were like at the time. Perhaps it's a blessing. But it feels more like a betrayal.

I'm pretty sure I loved her, though. Once in awhile Phil will say something, or turn his head a certain way, and I'll get a memory flash, a momentary glimpse of Tiff that pierces my heart like an ice pick.

It's not Phil's fault. But that doesn't make it hurt any less.

I've never mentioned it to him. He has pain enough of his own. And I'm the guy who caused it. The one who married his only daughter and carried her off to Detroit to pursue my hotshot legal career. The one who was driving when a drunk swerved across the centerline and erased Tiffany and most of my memories of her.

I'm sure Phil would rather have lunch with almost anyone else on the planet. But twice a week, like clockwork, we share sandwiches at my desk and make conversation. About local politics,

the antiques business, my health, his health. Anything but Tiffany.

Sometimes he brings me brochures for college classes or tells me about a law firm looking for a junior partner. He thinks I'm wasting my talents in the shop. I should go back to law school or retrain myself to do something else. Move on. Start a new life.

But how can I do that when I can't remember my old one?

Just as Phil and I were running out of small talk, Karla Frantzis swept in. In a slate blouse and slacks, she reminded me of a junco, pert, energetic. Bright-eyed.

"Hi, am I interrupting?"

"Not a bit," Phil said, rising. "I'm Phil Barrett, Stuart's father-in-law."

"Karla Frantzis," she nodded. "Have we met? Your name seems familiar."

"It's probably on your lease," I said. "Phil owns most of the buildings on this block, including yours. Karla's buying out Clara Pattakos."

"Glad to hear it," Phil said. "We need more new faces in the Oldtown district. How's the business doing?"

"Almost too well. I hope you weren't kidding about that free advice offer, Mr. Kenyon."

"Call me Stu, and I wasn't kidding. What's up?"

"I got a call from the city clerk's office asking if I could handle an . . . execution sale? Is that the right word? Anyway, I said I'd do it, the shop needs the money, but they want to hold it tomorrow afternoon—"

"Tomorrow? They usually advertise them for a couple of weeks. What's the rush?"

"I don't know. I've never done one of these before. That's why I'm here. I could really use your help."

"No offense, Miss Frantzis, but I'd rather not—"

"Please, it won't take much time. You've already seen the merchandise."

"What do you mean, I've seen it?"

"The execution sale is at the old house on Centralia, where we met."

"The Potter house?" Phil asked, frowning.

"You know it?" I asked.

"Everybody knows that old eyesore," Phil shrugged. "The Potters were big rich once, lumber money. Gone now. The Downtown Development Authority bought the house a few months ago. It's slated for demolition. Anybody living there must be squatting."

"I wouldn't know," Karla said. "The clerk just asked me to

catalog anything of value on the premises and sell it off tomorrow. If you're willing to help with the pricing, we can tag everything tonight. I'll handle the sale tomorrow and split the take fifty-fifty. Does that sound fair?"

"It's more than fair, it's just that—"

"I know, Clara already warned me these sales are awful and I shouldn't have taken the commission. If you'd rather not help, I understand."

"But you're going ahead whether I help or not?"

"I said I'd do it so I will," she said simply. "Sorry, didn't mean to put you on the spot. Maybe another time. Nice meeting you, Mr. Barrett." She was already halfway to the door.

"Hey, wait up, I didn't say I wouldn't help."

"You mean you will? Great! Does seven thirty work for you?"

"Tonight? Um, sure, that's fine."

"Good, I'll meet you there. I'd better get back to the shop. And thanks." She waved a cheery goodbye to Phil and bustled out. The energy level in the room dropped by eighty percent.

"Nice-looking woman," Phil observed.

"I guess."

"I thought you hated execution sales."

"I do, but the guy squatting at the Potter house is a goon. I couldn't very well let her go there alone."

"What were you doing at the Potter house?" Phil was eyeing me oddly.

"Lurch held a private sale last night. Probably trying to beat the execution sale."

"That's illegal, isn't it?"

"Not if he hasn't been officially notified of the sale. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. People say the place is haunted."

"It looks like it should be. Somebody said a photographer committed suicide there."

"Jerome Potter. The last of his sorry-ass line."

"You knew him?"

"Met him." There was an "end of story" chill in his tone so I changed the subject. Phil and I don't need to share any ghost stories. We're living in one.

Karla Frantzis climbed out of a hot pink VW as I pulled up in front of the Potter house that night. The car suited her. Perky and bright. Phil was right. She was a good-looking woman. Funny I hadn't noticed before.

"Hi, I was about to give up on you."

"Am I late?"

"Nope," she grinned, "I'm always early. Shall we?"

I followed her up the steps and she rang the bell. A woman/girl answered, dishwater blonde, unkempt hair, soiled T-shirt and shorts, dark circles under her eyes. She was only twenty or so. A hard twenty.

"Trane ain't here."

"Actually, we're not here to see him," Karla said, giving the girl a hundred-watt smile and a business card. "We're the appraisers. For the execution sale tomorrow?"

The girl frowned at the card, her lips moving as she read it. "What's this supposed to mean?"

"We need to price things for the sale. The city clerk said you'd been notified."

"Trane said somethin' about it. Never tells me squat anyway. What do you want to see?"

"Pretty much everything, I'm afraid," Karla said, trailing the girl into the living room. "Your name is . . . ?"

"Chastity. That's a hoot, huh? There ain't much left; Trane already ditched most of it. Help yourself. I never go upstairs anyway. Place creeps me out. Frickin' wind howls around this house like a coyote. You want me, I'll be in my bedroom watchin' TV. The stuff in there is mine, personal, I mean. Stay the hell away from it."

She shuffled off to her bedroom, closing the door. And locking it with an audible click.

"Can she do that?" Karla asked. "I thought the execution lien covered everything in the house."

"You're right, it does. Stand back, I'll kick down her door."

"Wait a minute!" She grabbed my arm, pulling me away from the door. "Are you nuts! You can't—" I tried to keep a straight face, couldn't quite manage.

"You jerk!" she said, punching my shoulder.

"Sorry, couldn't resist. But you're right. Technically, everything in the house is supposed to be sold, but nobody expects us to unplug that kid's TV. The city doesn't really care about the money from the sale anyway. They want Lurch to move on and an execution sale is one more way to turn the screw."

"Lurch?"

"The butler from the Addams Family? This place reminds me of their haunted house. What's his real name again?"

"Trane. John Thomas Trane."

"Lurch suits him better. Let's try to wrap this up before Mr. Trane pulls into the station."

The Potter house was a rambling wreck of a place, three floors with a dozen rooms each. Still, cataloging the furnishings wasn't difficult. Trane and his girlfriend were only using a few rooms on the first floor. The others were either empty or trashed. Walls kicked in, ceiling fixtures ripped down. Senseless carnage.

We found a few pieces of chipped china in the kitchen, some filthy flatware. One of the dinette chairs looked like part of a Gambles set, but the seat had been recovered with terry cloth and the legs were rusty. Two bucks instead of two hundred.

All the living room furniture was third- or fourthhand, castoffs Goodwill wouldn't bother picking up.

"Look, I'm sorry about this," Karla said. "If the sale doesn't earn enough to pay for your time, I'll make up the difference."

"Forget it, a deal's a deal. Besides, this is kind of fun, like exploring a haunted castle."

"Complete with an evil giant. Maybe we'll have better luck upstairs."

And we did, sort of. The second floor was closed off to save heat and a few rooms still had some original furnishings. Or what was left of them.

Chairs had been torn apart, linings slashed. A turn of the century sleigh bed had been kicked to pieces.

"My god," Karla said softly, "this must have been a lovely home once. How could anybody do this to it?"

"Maybe Lurch was looking for something. Loose change, a lost doobie? Or maybe kids trashed it before he moved in. It's slated for demolition anyway so I don't suppose it matters."

"But even that seems like a crime. I thought the Downtown Development Authority was supposed to preserve old houses. Look at this woodwork, the moldings, the mantels above the doors. All oak and at least a century old. Isn't it worth quite a bit?"

"It's certainly worth more than the furniture we've seen. I expect the contractor will recover it before they raze the place. C'mon, let's finish up. This is beginning to bum me out."

The other rooms were the same, a shambles. But at the end of one hall, a mystery.

The room was windowless, its walls lined with shelves, most torn down. Metal bins scattered around. Karla glanced the question at me.

"I think this was probably a darkroom. The previous owner was a photographer, Jerome Potter. I was told he committed suicide here."

"In this room, you mean?"

"I don't know. He supposedly hanged himself so I guess it could have been here. These shelves look strong enough."

"Thanks for sharing that," Karla shivered. "Is this stuff worth anything?"

"Not in this condition. Most of the trays are too banged up to be of any use." I opened a storage closet . . . and froze. Trying to understand what I was seeing.

"What is it?" Karla asked, moving up beside my shoulder.

"I'm not sure." The closet was deep, lined with bookcase shelving. But one of the bookcases was on hinges. It was pulled away from the wall, revealing another cubicle beyond it.

"Whoa, a secret room?" Karla asked.

"Looks like it," I said, swinging the bookcase/door open a little wider. I thought the hidden room was just another storage closet. Until I noticed the small three-step ladder. And the sliding panel set high in the wall. Curious, I stepped up and slid open the panel.

"What is it?"

"A peephole," I said. "I've only seen them in movies. You can see into the next room from here."

"What's in there?"

"Nothing now, it's as trashed as the rest of the house. But there are clothes hooks and a couple of smashed mirrors. Maybe it was a dressing room."

"So the photographer was a Peeping Tom?"

"Peeping Jerome, actually."

"What did he keep in these cabinets?" Karla asked, tugging open an empty drawer.

"Pictures and stereopticon slides, I think. There's some broken glass in this drawer. By the way, I found a couple of slides mixed in with the View-Master reels I bought. You're welcome to them." I knelt to pick up a torn black and white photograph. Someone's arm. I passed it to Karla.

"This was taken here," she said.

"Here?"

"In the sitting room at the end of the hall. See, the fireplace is in the background."

She was right, not that it mattered. There was no way to tell whose arm it was or even when it was taken. The photo wasn't dated. More scrap. Which summed up everything we'd seen.

We poked our noses into every room on the upper floors. Zip. The attic had a small trove, a few toys, some doll furniture, a rusty tricycle. Karla consulted with me on prices but it was strictly a

courtesy. She knew this kind of merchandise better than I did.

"I think we're done," Karla said, taking a final look around the attic. "A few pieces of furniture from below might be salvageable but I think Mr. Trane has already sold off everything of value. I'm guessing he left this stuff up here because it isn't worth toting downstairs. If the execution sale clears fifty bucks tomorrow I'll be amazed."

Chastity was waiting for us at the foot of the stairs.

"Satisfied? I told you there wasn't nothin'."

"You were right," Karla said. "And I don't blame you for avoiding the upstairs. It's like *The Shining* up there."

"We found a darkroom on the second floor with a concealed storage room," I said. "Do you know what was in there?"

"Trane found some French postcards in a closet upstairs. Weird pictures, little boys undressing? Plus some old cameras and stuff. Sold 'em for a few bucks, then he kicked the crap out of the place lookin' for more secret rooms."

"Any luck?"

"Sure. He found a million bucks stashed in the walls. That's why we're still squattin' in this beautiful mansion. Are you two done screwin' around?"

"For tonight," Karla said. "I'll be back in the morning to set up the sale. I'll try not to disturb you but—"

"Disturb all you want. I'm bailin' outa here in the morning. Had enough of this town, enough of Trane, too. Beat it and lemme get some sleep. I got a big day tomorrow."

"No problem," Karla said sweetly. "Pleasant dreams."

"Sorry this turned out to be such a bust," she sighed, as we walked to our cars.

"Not your fault. Execution sales are never much fun. I'm just sorry we didn't get to see the place before Trane tore it apart."

"The house has obviously been closed up for years. I wonder what he thought he'd find? Other than porno postcards, I mean." I hesitated. "Maybe he did find something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. He wasn't looking for antiques, since he wrecked some pretty fine furniture looking for whatever it was. None of the stuff at his clearance sale last night was valuable. I wonder if he showed us everything? Or maybe set the good stuff aside?"

"Where? We went through the whole house."

"But not the garage. I asked Lurch about it last night and he got hostile . . . hey, wait up!"



Karla was already trotting up the driveway around the house to the rear. A two-car, two-story garage as old as the house and just as decrepit.

"Wow. It's certainly big enough," she said.

"There were no automobiles when the house was built. This was probably a carriage house first, converted for cars later on. Maybe servants' quarters upstairs. Unfortunately, the windows have been painted over and that's a pretty hefty padlock on the door."

"The clerk gave me a key ring for the house," Karla said, fishing through her purse. "Maybe we can open it. Assuming I don't keel over from the stench first. What is that godawful smell?"

"Maybe Lurch hides the bodies back here—"

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doin'?" Trane roared, charging around the corner of the house.

"Pricing items for the execution sale tomorrow," Karla said firmly. "We need to see what's inside."

"There ain't nothin' inside!"

"In that case you won't mind if—"

"Forget it! Maybe the city can run me out by claimin' I owe bogus taxes but I still got rights. My personal stuff's in this garage and you two are nothin' but frickin' thieves! You'd best get step-pin' or you're by God gonna need an ambulance. Move!"

"Absolutely," I said, taking Karla's arm, hauling her off. "We're on our way."

"And don't come back!" A gust of wind howled up the driveway, echoing his rage.

"Now wait just a darn minute," Karla protested.

"Quiet!" I hissed, taking a firmer grip as she struggled to twist free, hurrying her back to her car.

"Damn it, Kenyon, let go of me! What are you doing?"

"Getting us out of serious trouble."

"That big goof doesn't scare me—"

"Well he should! Did you see his eyes? Pupils dilated, twitching, hyperaggressive. He's stoned to the bone on something, probably methedrine. You could clip him with a sledge hammer and he'd look around for mosquitoes. He's irrational and touchy as a time bomb."

She hesitated, scanning my face. "Okay," she nodded, "maybe you're right. So why does an antiques dealer know so much about methedrine?"

"Because I've prosecuted forty or fifty crystal meth cases, everything from DUI to murder."

"Prosecuted? You mean you're an attorney?"

"Used to be. I was an assistant D.A. for Wayne County. Had an auto accident. My wife was killed. I got my face rearranged and my brains scrambled. Massive head injury. Wasn't expected to live. But I did. Sort of."

"How do you mean, sort of?"

"I was comatose for months, came out of it with my memory damaged. Some sections of it are missing. Years. You can't try cases if you can't remember precedents or even whether you took a course on precedents."

"You seem all right to me."

"I am okay. I'm walking, talking . . ." I froze, staring at her. "Who are you?"

"Karla," she said, concerned. "I'm . . . you jerk! You did it again."

"Sorry. I think the crash twisted my sense of humor."

"Assuming you ever had one," she said, shaking her head. "Clara warned me you were a little strange. Nice, but strange."

"Then humor me. Don't come here alone tomorrow. I'll call my father-in-law and get a deputy to escort you, okay?"

"I can take care of myself."

"I don't doubt that for a second. Let me arrange some protection anyway. Please."

"Maybe it's not a bad idea. Our friend back there does seem a little spacey. A deputy? Can your father-in-law really fix that?"

"Sure. Bay Harbor's a nice town, but it's old fashioned. The same families have been running things here for the last hundred years. My father-in-law, the sheriff, local judges, businessmen. All buddies who grew up together, went to the same schools."

"An old boy network?"

"Something like that. But in a good way."

"Maybe. If you're one of the old boys."

"I'm not, but my father-in-law is. Let me fix this."

"Okay," she said, climbing into her VW. "But tell him to be on time. I'll be here at ten."

"The deputy will be waiting."

"You know, it's really a shame. This was a beautiful house once. Didn't Mr. Barrett say the Potters were old money? Wouldn't that make them part of your old boy network?"

"Maybe," I said, glancing at the run-down old mansion. "Why?"

"Because if the last Potter hanged himself here, I guess being an old boy wasn't much help, was it?"

I didn't dream of toasters that night. Had a new one instead. I was wandering through the Potter house, alone. And terribly

afraid. Because the wind was howling around the house like a wolf pack. And every room had a corpse in it. A dead man, hanging from the ceiling, turning slowly to face me, his features hideously distorted. And then his eyes would open—

And I'd bolt from the room, fleeing down endless icy corridors, desperately seeking a way out.

But behind every door I opened . . . . .

At some point I snapped awake, took twenty minutes to calm down, then fell back to sleep and started the same damned dream all over again. A long, hard night.

In the morning I was exhausted. Felt like I'd been running all night. I guess I had been. If nightmare miles count.

But my nightmare was only beginning.

A police car was in my parking spot in the lot behind my shop. When I parked beside it a cop climbed out at the same time I did. Short, squared-off, gunmetal gray hair combed straight back, fifties' style. Brown satin jacket.

"Mr. Kenyon? I'm Chief Tom Liske, with the sheriff's department. You're Phil Barrett's son-in-law, right?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Phil called me first thing this morning, said you needed a deputy as an escort?"

"It isn't for me. You were supposed to meet the woman running the execution sale at the Potter house on Centralia." I checked my watch. "Jeez, you'd better get over there. She said she'd be there at ten."

"I don't do escort work, Mr. Kenyon, and there won't be any execution sale at the Potter house. It's not there anymore."

"What?"

"There was an explosion last night. The garage blew up and the house burned to the ground. Can you tell me anything about that?"

"I don't understand. Why ask me?"

"You obviously had some trouble over there or you wouldn't have requested a deputy, right? So what happened?"

"I went there to help Miss Frantzis price items for an execution sale. Lurch got—"

"Lurch?"

"The guy living there."

"You mean John Trane?"

"I guess that's his name. Big guy, spooky house. Lurch, the giant butler, right? The Addams Family on TV?"

"I get it, Mr. Kenyon. And you had some trouble with Lurch?"

"Not exactly. More like a minor confrontation. We were checking out the garage, he got hostile and ran us off."

"Must have been embarrassing, in front of your girl and all."

"Miss Frantzis isn't my girl, I've only known her a few days. Look, I know you're only doing your job here but you're wasting your time. Lurch, Trane, whatever his name is, was half out of his tree on meth last night. Since the city's evicting him and his girlfriend is taking off—"

"You know his girlfriend too?" He checked a notepad. "Chastity Salvador?"

"We met her last night, why?"

"You seem to know these people pretty well."

"Well enough to know that if somebody torched the Potter house, Trane's the one you should be talking to, not me."

"Maybe so. Phil tells me you're a lawyer. Used to be an assistant D.A. with the Wayne County prosecutor's office?"

"That's right. So?"

"Seems like you came a long ways from Detroit just to open a junk shop."

"Secondhand shop."

"Whatever. I'd think an attorney could do better. A lot of guys would give an arm for the opportunities you have."

"I wouldn't know. What's that got to do with anything?"

"I'm just trying to make you add up, Mr. Kenyon. Me, I'm a Bay Harbor boy, born and raised. A northside Polack, strong as an ox and half as smart. But when the Potter house blew up, it occurred to me that Trane might be involved. I even put out an all points for him. Found him too. Know where he was?"

"I give up. Where?"

"In jail. Punched out a bartender over in Saginaw. Spent the night in the tank there. Refused to give the arresting officers his name. They didn't know who he was till his prints came back this morning. How's that for an alibi, counselor?"

"Pretty good."

"I think so too. That's why I'm here, talking to the guy who had a . . . minor confrontation with Trane last night. Just before his freakin' house blew up."

"I've told you all I know. What did his girlfriend say?"

He looked away a moment, making up his mind. "She won't be making any statements," he shrugged. "On account of she's dead."

"Dead?"

"She was in the house when it went up. Never had a chance. Garage exploded, torched the old house like a flamethrower. If

she was lucky, the explosion killed her before she burned. Looks like the garage was a methamphetamine lab. But then you already knew that, didn't you? You said Trane was high on meth."

"I don't know anything about a lab, but I've met a few meth heads."

"In Detroit, you mean. Trane is from Detroit."

"So is Eminem. Detroit's a big town, Chief. I only met Trane a few days ago. Here."

"Are you certain about that? Phil tells me you had a closed head injury a year or so back. Said it affects your memory."

"That's right. Sometimes."

"No offense, Mr. Kenyon, but you've got a pretty good defense going yourself. Could it be you knew Trane but don't remember? But maybe he remembered you? Something like that?"

"If he remembered me he didn't mention it. You're making this too complicated, Chief. If Trane was cooking crystal the clock was already running on him. Meth's a high risk business. Labs blow up, guys toast their brains on their own dope, or their competition whacks them out."

"You think that's what happened? Trane's competition took a run at him? Killed his girlfriend by accident?"

"I don't know, I'm only guessing. Sounds like you are too."

"Amen to that," Liske admitted. "Well. This has been real interesting, Mr. Kenyon. Just so we're clear on something, I'm not the detective who's handling this case, that'll be Sergeant Thompson. He may want to talk to you later. I came because Phil Barrett and I have been pals our whole lives, dated the same girls, played high school football together. I knew your wife, Tiffany. Watched her grow up. I'm sorry as hell for your loss. She was special."

"Yes she was."

"That said, I can only do so much for auld lang syne. You say you don't know Trane or his girlfriend, I'll accept that. For now. But if you're jerking me around—"

"I'm not."

He eyed me a moment, reading my face. And maybe my thoughts. "Okay. Sorry we couldn't have met under better circumstances, Mr. Kenyon. And if you have any more ideas about who might've torched that house, give me a call, okay? Us small town cops need all the big city help we can get."

Right.

After Liske left I opened the shop. Sort of. Usually I put on coffee, straighten the stock, then scan the morning paper for sales.

Not today. Didn't even turn on the lights. Just sat at my desk, surrounded by debris from other lives. Thinking about a girl named Chastity. And how sudden life can be. And how hard.

The bell on the front door jingled. Karla Frantzis poked her head in. "Hi, are you busy?"

"Not very. I take it you've heard what happened?"

"Had a visit from the police first thing this morning," she said somberly, stepping in. "It's awful. That poor girl."

"She said the house frightened her. I guess she was right to be afraid. What did the police want?"

"I'm not sure. He was polite, but he asked a lot of questions. Mostly about you."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth, that I don't know you very well. I don't think he believed me."

"Cops quit believing people the first week they wear the badge. They get lied to. A lot. Tends to shake their faith in humanity."

"You used to be in that line of work. How's your faith in humanity?"

"I'm not sure I ever had any. Why do you ask?"

"You seem different this morning. Darker."

"This situation's stirring up a lot of stuff I'm still trying to work through."

"The accident, you mean? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. All I did was talk about it in the hospital. Talked to psychiatrists, psychologists, rehab therapists. Try to remember, Mr. Kenyon. Try to forget. Try to fly to the moon by flapping your arms. I've had all the advice I can handle."

"Maybe you just need a friend. I'm a good listener."

"Then try listening! I don't want to talk, I don't want a new pal, I just want to be left alone."

"Whoa," she said, stiffening. "I hear that loud and clear. I didn't mean to pry, I just—maybe I'd better go."

"No, wait a minute. I'm sorry I bit your head off. You seem like a nice person and you probably mean well, but you're wasting your time on me. I'm like the things in my shop. Damaged goods. Secondhand."

Pausing in the doorway, she glanced back at me. "I happen to like secondhand, Stu's Nothing New. Good stuff is worth saving. Maybe I'll see you around. Maybe not."

And she was gone. I sat there in the dark awhile, massaging my eyes, kicking myself for being a jerk. The phone rang. The last thing I wanted was more conversation. Picked it up anyway.

"Stu? It's Mamie Szmanski, from Midland. About those View-Master reels you sent over?"

"What about them? No good?"

"The quality's fine but we need to talk about them. Your place or mine?"

"I don't know if—damn. I'll have to call you back, Mamie, somebody's at the delivery door."

Probably Phil wondering why the lights were off in the shop.

I unlocked the delivery door and Trane barged in, shoving me back inside, slamming the door behind him.

"Hold on, you can't—" He hit me! No warning, a hard right, flush on the jaw. Then something slammed into my face. The floor, I think. I was on my hands and knees, trying to clear the haze. Still had the phone in my hand. Couldn't remember why.

Grabbing my shirt, Trane hauled me upright, his face an inch from mine. Red-eyed, pupils dilated, twitching, he was barely two clicks from insanity.

"I need my stuff back," he snarled. "Where is it?"

"What stuff?"

"From the house! I need all of it! Right frickin' now!"

"But I don't have it, I—"

"Don't jack me around! I ain't doin' no time over this! Where the hell is it?"

"I've already sold some—"

The front doorbell jingled, freezing both of us. Karla again.

"Okay, I've cooled off and—hey, what's going on?"

"Get out of here!" I yelled, hammering Trane with the phone, knocking him off me, gashing open his cheek. His face was streaming blood but he scarcely noticed. Scrambling to his feet, he went charging through the shop after Karla.

She ducked out into the street, yelling for help, fumbling for a cell phone.

I reeled after them, still wobbly from Trane's sucker punch, bouncing off the displays.

Outside, Trane and Karla were struggling over her cell phone, Karla still screaming for help. Tearing her phone away, Trane backhanded her, knocking her down.

And I snapped! Howling, I slammed into him, tackling him chest high, the rush carrying us across the hood of a parked car into the street. I came down on top as we crashed to the pavement, flailing wildly, landing a couple of punches, spraying us both with his blood. But he was too wired, too strong!

Clubbing me off him with a forearm, he wrestled me against the



car, pinning me with his weight, his hands gouging my throat, cutting off my air. The world shifted to red, then to black. Couldn't breathe, couldn't break his hold.

Tried to twist free, brought my knee up, hard, into his groin. Grunting from the impact, he lost his hold, stumbling back. As he lunged again I jammed my foot into his chest, kicking him off me.

Karla's scream was drowned in a shriek of rubber, then an earthquake crunch of metal bucked me into the sky! For an endless instant I was soaring, airborne, then I crashed down, bouncing off parked cars like a pinball. Landing hard on the concrete.

Tried to get up. Only made it to my hands and knees, dazed, looking around. Trane was sprawled a few feet from me, his legs pinned under a wrecked car, eyes sightless, blood streaming from his nose and mouth.

But it wasn't Trane. It was Tiffany! God! Tiff was bleeding! I crawled to her, cradling her head in my arms, crooning her name. But she didn't answer . . .

**S**now. Slowly swirling clouds of misty white. Couldn't quite see through it. Blinking, trying to focus. The blizzard slowly morphed into a ceiling tile. Not snow. A white ceiling tile. Heard a voice, far away. Faint, metallic. Asking Dr. Somebody to report somewhere. Didn't recognize the name. But the sound was very familiar.

Hospital. I was in a hospital. Tried to sit up. My head was hammering. Phil Barrett was there, sitting in a plastic chair by the bed. He looked rumpled, his tie askew.

"Easy, Stu," he said. "Just relax, I'll get a nurse."

"No, wait," I mumbled, grabbing his wrist. "Tiff was bleeding. Is she all right?"

He stared at me without answering. Which was answer enough. I lay back on my pillows. And faded away.

The second time I came out of the fog my head was a little clearer. Which was a good thing. Phil was still beside my bed but he wasn't alone. Chief Liske was there too, in uniform, leaning against the window frame, arms folded. Watching me.

"How do you feel?" Phil asked quietly.

"Like I fell off a mountain. A big one," I said, blinking, taking in the room, trying to gather my wits. "What happened?"

"We were hoping you could clear that up for us," Liske said.

"When you woke earlier, you seemed pretty confused," Phil said quickly. "Are you sure you're all right now?"

I considered that, remembering. "There was a . . . crash. I guess I had a flashback. Something like that. I thought . . . Hell, I don't know what I thought. I'm okay now."

"What went down out there, Mr. Kenyon?" Liske pressed.

"I just remember . . . bits and pieces. Trane came to my shop. Angry. Wired up on something. I think he'd been in a fight."

"Why do you say that?"

"His face was marked, fat lip, scratch under one eye. He was raving, then he decked me. We were mixing it up when Karla came in. He chased her. I went after him and . . . tackled him, I guess. I'm not clear about the rest of it. There was some kind of a crash and . . . here we are."

"You were fighting in the street," Phil said. "A car swerved to avoid you and lost control. You're lucky to be alive—"

Liske waved him to silence. "Why were you fighting with Mr. Trane? Did you two have a falling out?"

I stared at Liske, trying to grasp the question. "We never had a falling in. I hardly know the guy. I only met him a few days ago."

"Then what was the fight about?"

"I honestly don't know. He pushed into my shop ranting about wanting his stuff back."

"The meth, you mean?"

"Meth?"

"Trane was running a methedrine lab in his garage," Liske explained patiently. "It blew up, remember? About an hour after your previous argument with him."

"I didn't argue with him that night. We were near the garage and he ran us off."

"So you said. And this morning this guy you hardly know comes to your store and attacks you for no reason at all?"

"It's the truth. Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Questioning me like a suspect. You must have talked to Miss Frantzis. Didn't she tell you what happened?"

"She said she walked into your shop, saw you and Trane struggling. You yelled at her to run, Trane caught her as she was dialing 911 on her cell. You jumped Trane, pushed him into the street. Where he was struck by a car. And killed."

"He's dead?" I swallowed.

"Why should you care? He attacked you for no reason, remember?"

I looked away, trying to make sense of it.

"Mr. Kenyon," Liske said quietly. "You'd better understand your

situation. We don't have much crime here in Bay Harbor. All of a sudden we've got two deaths in as many days and you're associated with both of them. The only reason you're not under arrest right now is because Phil Barrett says you're okay and that's good enough for me. But I've gone as far as I can to protect you. If there's anything you haven't told me—"

"There isn't."

"All right. Look, I know that your accident left you with some memory problems, but I need something to work with here. If you can come up with anything that might help clear this up, anything at all, you call me or tell Phil about it. We take care of our own in this town. We'll do our best to keep you out of trouble. Fair enough?"

"More than fair, Chief. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, this isn't over. We'll talk again when you're feeling better. Meantime, you rest up. And do some serious thinking, all right?"

After Liske left, Phil tried to make small talk, but he was clearly uneasy, fidgeting, avoiding my eyes.

"What's wrong?" I asked at last.

"Are you sure you're all right, Stu? When you woke up before, you . . ."

"I asked you about Tiffany. I remember."

He nodded, his eyes misting.

"I was groggy, Phil. Waking up in a hospital, I guess I got the two accidents mixed up. I'm sorry if it upset you. But I'm not crazy. I know Tiff's gone."

"And the rest of it? Your trouble with this Trane fella? You've got to admit it looks bad. Is there anything more you want to say to me? Off the record, I mean?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Do you have some kind of a drug problem, Stu? Do you need money? Damn it, I've stood by you and I've asked friends to go out on a limb for you—"

"What are you saying? That you think I might be mixed up with a dope dealer? That I kill people? I thought you believed in me."

"I did. I mean, I do. But—"

"But what?"

"You've changed, Stu. The fella my Tiffany married was a hot-shot young attorney who took my girl down to Detroit to ride a rocket to the top. But since the accident, moving to Bay Harbor, opening a dinky little secondhand shop . . ." He shook his head.

"I've tried to be patient, Stu, I know you've been through a lot. But I'm not sure I know you anymore."

"Then maybe you never did. Look, I'm really tired, Phil. It's been a long day."

"Sure," he said, rising stiffly. "You get some rest, boy. We'll talk later. Meantime, take Tom Liske's advice and do some thinking. You could be in a lot of trouble."

"I will."

And I did. But not at the hospital. After Phil left, I dragged myself out of bed, waited for the room to stop rocking, then stumbled into the bathroom for a quick inventory. A bandage on my left side, assorted bruises everywhere, throat going purple, a half dozen stitches above my right ear. No wonder Phil figured me for a thug. I looked like a wino after a train wreck. Felt like one, too.

I struggled into my street clothes, then checked myself out. I've already spent too much of my life in hospitals.

My shop was stone silent when I let myself in. Nothing moving, nothing breathing. Dead. The green message light on my answering machine was winking at me. I ignored it.

Instead, I eased myself painfully down at my desk at the back of the store, looking out over the orderly rows of secondhand stock. Kitchen canister sets, magazine racks, Bentwood rockers, Beatlemania handbags, all neatly arranged by era or manufacturer. I'd only been away a few hours, but somehow it looked very different to me.

Liske called it a junk shop. He was right. Everything in it was hard used. Thrown away.

Especially me. Battered and scarred. With a broken memory. And a secondhand heart.

There was a tentative tap on the back door.

"Come on in, Phil." But it wasn't Phil.

"Hey," Karla Frantzis said. "I called the hospital, they said you checked out. I need to talk to you . . . oh my God. You look awful. Are you okay?"

"No. I'm definitely not okay. My, ah," I coughed. "My wife is dead. Tiffany was killed in an auto accident eighteen months ago."

Karla stared at me, her eyes dark with concern. "I don't understand."

"When I woke up at the hospital, I asked my father-in-law if Tiff was all right. Scared the hell out of him. He thought I'd lost the few marbles I have left. When he asked me about it later I told him I knew she was dead. No big deal. I've said it a hundred times

since the accident. But . . ." I swallowed. "Today was the first time I said it and knew it was true."

"You'd better let me drive you home. You need to rest—"

"I've been resting. Hell, I've been sleepwalking for over a year. Hiding out in this place. I can't do it anymore. Trane's dead. Did you know?"

"I saw it happen," she nodded. "It wasn't your fault, Stu. He was trying to kill you."

"Yeah, I guess he was. But I don't understand why. I barely knew him."

"Did he say anything?"

"Something about wanting his stuff back."

"What stuff?"

"Methedrine, I guess. That's the police theory, anyway."

"But it was destroyed in the fire. He knew that. Why would he think you had it?"

"Maybe he didn't. I mean—he didn't say anything about meth. He said . . ." I closed my eyes, trying to focus. "He said he wanted the stuff from the house. All of it. But the meth was never in the house. We would have smelled it. Remember the stench outside the garage? Cooking up methedrine involves some nasty chemicals. Damn it, I should have recognized that smell."

"We were looking for antiques, not dope. But if Trane didn't want the meth, what was he after?"

"I don't know. Nothing from that house was worth more than a few bucks."

"I'm not so sure. That's why I wanted to talk to you. After you got hurt I followed the ambulance to the hospital, hung around the waiting room."

"Why?"

"Don't be a jerk! I wanted to be sure you were all right. When they told me you were okay, I came back to my shop. But it felt odd. The door was still locked but . . . I think somebody broke in while I was away."

"Why do you think so?"

"I'm a neat freak, Stu. I know where things belong. Everything in the place was disarranged, not trashed or anything, but definitely moved around. I think someone searched it."

"Is anything missing?"

"That's the odd thing. Only my ledger. The one with my notes from the execution sale at the Potter house."

I chewed that over a moment, remembering cold, empty rooms, smashed furniture. And my dark dream of the hanged man.

"But we didn't find anything of value in that house. Nothing. Unless it was something Trane sold the night before."

"Like what?"

"It had to be something I bought because he came here looking for it. And I didn't buy much, so . . ." I broke off, thinking.

"What is it?"

"That box of glass slides. The stereopticon negatives? Did you look at them?"

"Just a glance. The tints are reversed so I couldn't tell much."

"Do you have a stereopticon viewer?"

"A couple of them, why?"

"I want you to go through that box of negatives carefully, to see exactly what they are. But don't do it in your shop. Take them to a public place, let's say the Hampton Mall cafeteria."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"I have to check something first. I'll meet you there in an hour. But don't dally at your shop. Get in and get out. Whoever searched it didn't find what he was after. He might try again."

After Karla left, I took the two stereopticon slides I'd put aside in my desk and held them up to the light.

There was nothing remarkable about them. They were duplicates of the same shot. A boy, ten or eleven, leaning over, lacing his shoes. And I realized what had bothered me about the picture earlier.

There was a radio on a coffee table in the background. A Deltrola, chrome front, naugahyde body. Very stylish, quite collectable.

But it didn't belong there.

Stereopticons were popular in the late nineteenth century, for parlors, public slide shows. By World War I they were gone, replaced by the movies. Collectors prize the slides because they offer a clear view of the past, a window into the Victorian era.

But the radio in this shot dated from around nineteen fifty. So what was it doing in a stereopticon negative?

Obviously Jerome Potter had taken these photographs using an antique camera. But why?

And why make two negatives of the same shot . . . but they weren't exactly the same. The angle was slightly different. And that was the answer. 3-D. The pictures were three dimensional.

I made a call to Mamie Szmanski to ask about the View-Master reels I sent her. And got a major chewing out. She used language I've never heard outside a locker room.

Afterward I sat at my desk, thinking, as the afternoon faded into dusk. I didn't turn on the lights.

They came a little after seven. Didn't bother to knock. I was half dozing when I heard a key in the lock. The door eased open and they slipped inside. Shadow figures in the dark. Flashlight beams flicked around the room. One flicked across my face. Then whipped back, locking onto me.

"Come on in. Why don't you switch on the lights?"

The fluorescent lights flickered on overhead, bathing the shop in an icy glare.

There were two of them. Chief Tom Liske in civvies, blue windbreaker, faded jeans, carrying a weighted flashlight. And my father-in-law, Phil Barrett.

"Put your hands on the desk, Kenyon," Chief Liske ordered, pulling a snub-nosed automatic from under his windbreaker. "Don't even blink." Crossing the room, he patted me down for weapons. Didn't find any. Then backed away, the gun leveled at my midsection.

"My God, Tom, what are you doing?" Phil objected. "There's no need for that."

"You've stood up for this guy from the first and I've gone along," Liske growled. "Not anymore. There's too much at stake. We're gonna have a conversation, Kenyon. And if I don't like the way it goes, you'll be in more trouble than you ever dreamed of. Clear?"

I nodded.

"Where's the stuff you got from the Potter house?"

"Why do you want it?"

"Don't play dumb, Kenyon. You know Trane was cooking meth in the garage. He may have concealed it in something you bought—"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "No chance."

"What do you mean, no!"

"You aren't looking for methedrine, Chief. If you were, you'd have a dog with you. Any half-trained pooch can sniff that crap from across the street and we both know it. You're after something else."

"Like what?"

"Pictures. Pornography. Secret shots of little kids undressing. Pretty tame by today's standards, but there's a monster market for kiddie porn on the Internet. Especially if it's three dimensional, like stereopticons or View-Masters. How did you spot it? On the Web?"

Liske was a pro, his face showed nothing. But the pain in Phil's eyes told me more than I wanted to know.

"God," he said softly. "I'm almost glad—"



"Shut your mouth, Phil," Liske snapped. "He isn't one of us."

"No, I'm not," I conceded. "I'm an outsider who blundered into this. And now two people are dead. I need to understand what's happening."

"Give you enough to bury us?" Liske snorted. "Not likely."

"I don't want to bury anybody, Chief. I'm having trouble enough just making it day to day. But I'm involved in this now. And so are you. I think I know part of it. Suppose I tell you what I think? You can fill in the blanks. Or not. Your choice."

"I'm listening," Liske said.

"All right. Jerome Potter was a pornographer and a pedophile. He was old money and social position meant a lot in those days so business was good. Parents were proud to have their kids' pictures taken by a society photographer. But he was also sneaking pictures of the kids changing clothes. I'm guessing he got caught at some point. What happened?"

Warning Phil to silence with a look, Liske eyed me a moment, then shrugged. "Apparently taking pictures wasn't enough for Jerome. He started groping boys. When their parents found out, they had a real problem. They couldn't try Potter without putting a lot of children through hell, maybe marking them for life."

"So they ran him off instead?"

"Exactly," Phil said bitterly. "Jerome closed his studio and moved to Florida. Some years later he came back home to that old house and committed suicide. And good riddance!"

"The house stood empty for years," Liske continued. "Then a few months ago, some photos showed up in my department's Internet porn watch. I recognized some of the kids from years ago. Trane was squatting in the old Potter place. We figured he found a cache of Jerome's old photographs and peddled them."

"When he wasn't cooking meth," I added.

"Yeah, I knew about that," Liske admitted. "Trane wasn't too bright. You could smell his lab a block away. But I couldn't bust him. If he had more pictures they'd be found and entered as evidence. It would dredge up the whole dirty business again, cause a lot of pain and embarrassment to innocent people."

"So we decided to squeeze him out," Phil said, the story coming out in a rush now. "The Downtown Development Authority bought the house, served him with eviction papers, and ordered an execution sale. We didn't want trouble, we just wanted him to move on."

"I thought we had things under control," Liske continued. "We

planned to buy up everything at the sale, force Trane out, then demolish the place once and for all."

"But you found out Trane tried to beat the execution sale by unloading everything first. Then what? You torched the house?"

Phil and Liske exchanged a glance.

"We didn't," Liske conceded, "but there are others involved. Good men, family men, who have a lot to lose if those pictures become public. It's possible someone panicked and started that fire. There's no way to prove it now. Meth labs are high risk operations, you said so yourself. They blow up every damn day."

"And the dead girl?"

"Was living on top of her brain-dead boyfriend's meth operation. What happened was awful but it was an accident. No one meant her harm. She should have chosen her playmates better."

I glanced at Phil but he avoided my eyes.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now? Now it's over," Liske said simply. "If you'll let it be. We'll buy any pictures that surface and I'll bust the perverts who sell 'em. The DDA will build low income apartments on the Potter house site and in a few years nobody will remember it was ever there. We all move on. Any problem with that?"

"Just one."

"What's that?"

"You left out part of the story. You didn't commit arson and burglary to keep a few old pictures from turning up. You were afraid the truth about Jerome Potter would come out."

"What truth?"

"Child molesters are monsters who can pass for normal because they don't feel guilt about what they do. They commit unspeakable acts. They even commit murder. But they never commit suicide."

"What are you saying?"

"A few years after your folks ran Jerome off, he came back. Maybe he thought the scandal had blown over or that his money and social position would protect him. What he didn't figure was that some of the kids he molested had grown up. A few of them were playing high school football. When Jerome Potter hanged himself in that house, he wasn't alone, was he? And it wasn't suicide."

"God," Phil groaned, turning away.

"Shut your mouth," Liske snapped. "You're only guessing, Kenyon. You can't prove a thing."

"I'm not trying to. I don't give a damn about Potter. What happened to him was rough but it was still justice. It's the aftermath

that bothers me. Trane was a speed freak on borrowed time, but his girl wasn't part of this and neither was I. I think you threatened Trane with jail time, roughed him up, and turned him loose on me to recover those pictures. He wound up dead and nearly took me with him. And the girl? You can't just write her off as a casualty. She didn't deserve to die like that."

"Nobody meant for that to happen!"

"I believe you. I truly do. But she's dead all the same. And so is Trane. I don't know how you can make that right, gentlemen, but you'll have to find a way. I know a little about living with ghosts. My God, Potter's been dead all these years and he's still smashing your lives."

"What are you going to do?" Liske asked.

"Nothing. I owe Phil Barrett more than I can ever repay. So I won't say anything. I don't have to. Even if you never spend a day in jail you won't get away with this. It's going to destroy you. It's already happening. That's the trouble with the past. It may be gone, but it's never really over, is it? For any of us."

**I** was marking things down for a quick sale when the front doorbell jingled and Karla Frantzis came in. She was wearing a Christmas sweater, red with an embroidered green tree. Very festive. But there was nothing light about her mood. She made her way through the aisles to me, frowning at the sale prices.

"Somebody told me you were selling out and leaving. Going back to Detroit?"

"No. To Lansing. A buddy has a small law firm there. I can work as a paralegal, take some refresher courses at State, fill in the gaps.

"But why sell the shop? You love this place."

"I'm not sure that's true. Maybe I only needed it."

"What do you mean?"

"I was comatose for months after the crash. When I came out of the dark, they sent me home. Or tried to. We had a condo in Rochester Hills. All the furniture was new, expensive. Looked like it had just been delivered. But I couldn't remember it. Where we bought it or why we chose it. Tiff's grave was the same way. Her name is on the stone but . . ." I shook my head. "I couldn't remember her."

"Not anything?" Karla asked, watching me with those dark eyes.

"Only one thing. An afternoon when we were still in college. Tiff came charging into our crummy little apartment with a toaster she found at a flea market for five bucks. She was so excited about

it she made breakfast for supper that night. Bacon and eggs. And toast. Lots of toast. And we were laughing. I don't know why. And that's the only clear memory I have of her. Tiff and that dumb five dollar toaster."

"That's not so dumb," Karla said.

"Sure it is. People come into our stores shopping for bargains or collectibles, but down deep, most of them are really looking for . . . tokens. They think if they can find just the right memento, that somehow it'll open a door into their past and bring it all back. If only for a moment."

"My God," she said softly, getting it. "That's what you did, isn't it? Some people buy a few relics. You bought a whole store. This place is a shrine. To one afternoon a long time ago. To a single memory."

"Yeah, I guess it is. Crazy, right?"

"A little," she admitted. "It's also the most romantic thing I've ever heard."

"Romantic, crazy. What's the difference?"

"In your case, probably none, Kenyon. But that's not why I came. Can we talk business?"

"What business?"

"Secondhand. If you dump your stock at these prices you might as well hold an execution sale. Why don't you let me keep the shop open instead? I can run it for you along with my own, we can split the profits. And I'll have an excuse to see you once in awhile. To talk. What do you say?"

"That's a very generous offer."

"You bet it is. So?"

"Look, if you want to take over the shop, we can work that out. But you're wasting your time on me, lady. I'm damaged goods."

"I know that. And maybe you're not repairable. With second-hand, every buy is a gamble. But that's not always a bad thing. Taking a chance is part of the fun. Whenever I walk into a secondhand shop, do you know what I feel?"

"What?"

"Hope," she said. 🐾

# BOOKED & PRINTED

LENNY PICKER

**T**hese are good times for the many devotees of Sherlock Holmes whose appetites for further exploits of the master detective remain unsated. Although this is not the Great Boom of the 1970's, when Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, and the Royal Shakespeare Company's revival of William Gillette's play, *Sherlock Holmes*, unleashed such a plethora of pastiches that you could not swing a cat without hitting a lost Watsonian manuscript, a number of excellent works have appeared recently.

Of all the subgenres of Holmes pastiche, the most difficult to succeed at, and the rarest, is the short story that seeks to faithfully emulate Doyle. Although fifty-six of the sixty original cases were short stories, few publishers are willing to put out short story collections by a single author, preferring instead anthologies, often with a gimmicky theme (e.g., stories told from the viewpoints of Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, or other supporting cast members, or which inject Holmes into the supernatural world of H. P. Lovecraft), or lengthy novels that feature action-adventure rather than scientific deduction. This is not surprising; it is much harder to compose a classic crime puzzle than to have Holmes battle Dracula, rescue a love interest, or search ancient ruins for lost treasure. (For similar reasons it is now, amazingly, a quarter-century since the release of a traditional Holmes film.)

Fortunately, Calabash Press has made the excellent choice to present the work of Denis O. Smith, a British author whose series ranks with the very best pastiches ever written. The latest is **The Chronicles of Sherlock Holmes, Volume 4** (Calabash, \$31/hard-cover, \$21/paperback). Smith is unmatched by any contemporary writer in his skill in capturing Watson's unique narrative voice and in presenting a Holmes who would be instantly familiar to his creator. He has done so without needing to employ plot devices that link Holmes with historical figures or classic unsolved crimes, or make fascinating secondary figures from the canon such as Irene Adler, Mycroft Holmes, or Professor Moriarty into more significant presences. The four stories in the current collection are a nice mix of murder, espionage and fraud, which again mirrors the variety of plots of the originals—many of Doyle's best stories, including "The Red-Headed League" and "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," fascinate despite the absence of bloodshed.

The standout of the bunch is "The Adventure of the Willow Pool," a tale set very early on in the Holmes–Watson relationship. Smith does a nice job of depicting Watson's low self-esteem and feeling of being at loose ends at a time when he had neither returned to medical practice nor settled into his familiar role as the detective's Boswell, and he creates a natural entry point for the doctor into the inquiry by making the client a fellow veteran of the Afghan Wars. The problem is truly inspired—Captain John Reid has returned from serving his country with valor to find himself shunned by his family and neighbors, without explanation, and in a matter suggesting that he is believed to be guilty of a great crime. At a loss to account for this stunning response to his homecoming, Reid turns to Holmes, who manages, from seemingly minor indications, to uncover both the root of the universal hostility to the blameless soldier and the true culprit. The remaining stories—"The Adventure of the Von Strauffhausen Papers," "The North Walk Mystery," and "The Adventure of the Yellow Glove"—are also superb, without a single false note. Smith is long overdue for recognition beyond the inner circle of devoted Sherlockians, and those who discover his gifts will welcome news that two more volumes are currently in preparation.

Given the rarity of the classic short story pastiche, it is fortunate that other writers have woven variations on that theme that are still faithful to the spirit of the originals. Although others have attempted stories that cast Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself in the role of detective, none has approached the success of David Pirie whose **The Patient's Eyes: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes**, now out in paperback from St. Martin's (\$6.99), is a daring and provocative reimagination of Holmes and Watson that substitutes Dr. Joseph Bell, Doyle's medical school mentor and the role model for Holmes, for the fictional detective, and Doyle for Watson. By carefully weaving biographical details from Doyle's own troubled family, elements from Holmes stories such as "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist" and "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," and documented real-life crimesolving by Bell, Pirie has come up with something new—a genuinely terrifying mystery with baffling murders and suggestive clues that manages to present more three-dimensional and psychologically complex versions of the Baker Street duo. When Doyle's struggling medical practice brings him into contact with an attractive young woman who fears for her sanity after being pursued by a cloaked cyclist, Dr. Bell reaches out to help his former clerk by unraveling the twisted motivations behind a series of related gruesome murders. Pirie manages a rare feat by crafting scenes of spine-chilling horror that unfold in the light of day, and matches his sympathetic

protagonists with a fair-play mystery and a resolution that is both shocking and logical. While Pirie's second Bell-Doyle adventure, **The Night Calls** (St. Martin's, \$24.95), is a disappointment—an overlong, rambling narrative with minimal suspense or character development—the gifts he displayed in his debut offer hope that future entries in the series will return to the high standards he has set for himself. (The basic storylines of both books have been dramatized for television as part of the series *Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes*, featuring Ian Richardson as Bell.)

Donald Thomas, by contrast, made his Sherlockian debut with the unremarkable *The Secret Cases of Sherlock Holmes*, but has staked a claim toward deserving a wider readership with his second collection of pastiches, **Sherlock Holmes and the Voice from the Crypt and Other Tales** (Carroll & Graf, \$25), which matches the great detective with some of the classic historical crimes and figures of his day. This concept is far from new—a column could be written on just the books and films which put Holmes on the trail of Jack the Ripper—but few have managed to pair an authentic rendering of the classic characters with historically plausible and engaging plots, or have taken the time Thomas has to seek out more obscure true-life mysteries that would suit Holmes's skills. Especially enjoyable is "The Case of the Naked Bicyclists," in which a puritanical spinster's complaints about her neighbor's nighttime frolics with young women lead to a murder inquiry that forces Holmes to test the limits of his unorthodox investigative techniques. The title story, which involves Holmes and Watson with the Lambeth poisonings of the 1890's, is Thomas's masterpiece, mingling grim portrayals of London street life, an extremely cunning killer, Watson's personal involvement via his chance encounter with a dying victim, and ample instances of Holmes's quirky sense of humor.

*Lenny Picker, an inspector general in New York, has reviewed books for Publishers Weekly and Baker Street Miscellanea. A Sherlockian for three decades, he was honored with the title of "The Dog Who Did Nothing" for his leadership of the Yale Bullpups.*





# THE GIRL WATCHER

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JANICE LAW

“**M**ister, excuse me, Mister!”

*Mister!* Me, Troyman, formerly on a first name basis with a cool twenty million living, breathing listeners. Guys on cells and car phones making drive time with The Troy Donnelly Show, make that caps and emphasis, THE TROY DONNELLY SHOW! What’s this kid—twenty, maybe? Old enough but not enough car time. My fans were turnpike jockeys carrying a big load of carbon monoxide, reliables who got a thrill out of ringing up Troyman and saying *Hello, keep giving them hell*; no-lifers who wanted to vent, to grouse, to grab a bit of my air time.

“Yeah,” I say. “What’s wrong?” Course, I know. Knowledge has always been my strong suit. Who was on the take, who had an affair or an addiction; who was in, who was out, who had the goods, who had a weakness. I had all the dirt, and what I didn’t have, I knew how to get, because I could shake the Tree of Knowledge.

“You’re bothering the woman,” says the guard. Brown hair, dusty green top and pants over the regulation red swim trunks. He’s got a swimmer’s body, slim but well muscled, compact, not big. A lifesaver, not a bouncer.

“I’m looking for someone,” I say. “Someone important, all right? I’m meeting her on the beach and, sure, I stopped to talk to this young lady. She looks very like—”

“You grabbed her arm,” says the guard. “You kept calling her Shelley. You were insisting she knew you.”

“Mistake,” I say. “To err is human.” Kept me in business—the human penchant for error, for erring, for errant behavior, which in the right hands becomes blame, becomes a living, breathing illustration of the rottenness of things as they are, which is just the simple truth—and a damn profitable line, I can tell you.

"She was frightened," says the guard. "She complained." He looks like some bionic youth of the future in those reflecting bronze sunglasses. Probably has a drug problem.

"Look," I say, "you don't know who I am. I need to find Shelley . . ." I start to explain market share and distinctive voices and Shelley Phillips, who screwed my life up good, but he's not listening.

"You gotta stop bothering the women. You bother anyone again, you're back inside—and you're in for the whole afternoon."

That would be fatal, unthinkable, so I turn on the charm. Take out my wallet, ask him to get Carlos, the beach chair fellow, to take over a lounge for the woman who wasn't Shelley. I can see that now. She wasn't Shelley at all. "Something for yourself, too," I say.

"You want to get me fired?" he asks and turns on his heel.

I put away my wallet. I could have about bought this damn beach before Shelley. I still have a very nice waterfront house. I believe I do. Well, I know I do, because thanks to the Florida homestead law, the Phillipses can't touch the real estate. Nope. And I was smart enough to keep the Sunshine State property out of Linda's hands, though she went through my northern holdings like a dose of salts. Sure did.

I go back to my place, the chair and umbrella which I rent every day from Carlos, who saves one for me even when he's busy. Loyalty, right? I switch on my transistor radio—on the earphone in case it "bothers" someone. Two years ago that woman would have been thrilled to meet the Troyman. *Troy! I hear you every afternoon! Driving to Jersey!* Or Greenwich or Darien, points north and south. Who said women didn't like me? Maybe the show was a little rough—maybe. I hit the screaming sisterhood pretty hard; no friend of feminism, me. But charm. Everyone said I was charming off-mike.

A bit of static requiring delicate adjustments . . . There—drive time with my replacement. Why do I listen? Why, why? It's like a musician hearing someone else on his Strad. Pain, I can tell you. Flat, flat, he's very flat. Hits even the hot points without flare, without humor. Just another bloviator. I can't believe they pay him for this rubbish. Me, I could entertain and influence. Could yet. Could.

Can't. That's what they said to me. The media honchos in their fine suits, soft earth tones like a lot of Al Gore clones. What the hell were they thinking sartorially? *Wish we could, you're the greatest, a genius of the airwaves.* One of them actually called me a *genius of the airwaves*, like this was going to be news to me, when

what was needed was a genius in the boardroom and another helping of guts all around. They lacked intestinal fortitude, friends, unlike my nearest and dearest who possessed a super-abundance of that commodity.

Failure of information. So ironic. But not forever. I've about got it worked out and when I find Shelley, which is only a matter of time, I'll be back. Back on top, three to six drive time, master of the airwaves with the verbal equivalent of carpet bombing, me, Troyman.

The guards are talking to each other behind the glass. No old-fashioned open chairs for these boys and girls. Lazy bastards. I don't know what they pay them for except to annoy law-abiding citizens. Forget them. Shelley didn't swim, so I can cross off the girl guards. No Shelley there.

They're looking down at me, comparing notes. All right, so I've talked to a few people. No harm in that. You come to the beach to catch the rays, relax, talk to your fellow men without the mediation of the mike—important, no? I think so, although maybe I need the mike, need mediation, need to be Troyman. A dangerous line of thought to pursue. Get back in the hunt!

And I will. It's just the little matter of finding Shelley, who was a bad idea from the start; I see that now. Didn't then, when I was operating on a high of adrenaline and testosterone, all natural, I might add, derived one hundred percent from success, of which I've had a lot: careers made and ruined, legislation pushed or derailed, elections won or lost. Thanks to me.

Shelley didn't seem such a big indulgence in those terms. What was she like? An able researcher, certainly; everyone I hired was. You don't screw around with your research if you're in pontification for the long haul. So smart, sure; a lively, pretty girl with long brown hair. First caution ignored. I should have taken warning from Clinton and Condit and gone for a blonde. A curious cultural moment, friends: the taste of powerful men for brunettes.

What else? Knockout figure, long legs, blue eyes with thick dark lashes. I think it was the eyes that got me, those round, innocent eyes; two little beacons of pleasure on either side of a short, freckled nose. And she was such a nice kid, everybody liked her; Margaret, the crew, even Linda, who met her at the annual office party, thawed out a few degrees. Shelley brought out a maternal side in some surprising ladies.

I should have seen that, but she made me feel young again at the mike, as if I was just starting out with fire in all the right places, instead of in the upper digestive tract, courtesy of too much snack

food and soda. Just the same, I didn't mean for us to be serious; I didn't intend for Shelley to disrupt my life, no way. Not when I'd figured out how life worked, when *I had the knowledge*, as London cabbies say. That's their way of indicating they know the city, the roads and byways, the one-way streets, the cul-de-sacs, the motorways and alleys and traffic regulations: the texture of their world.

I picked up stuff like that when I traveled, how people talked, what their vocabulary was, what the jargon sounded like—because ninety percent of everything today is rhetoric, the promotion of manure as lawn food, and boy, was I good at that. The very best.

So what was *my* knowledge, you ask? Speaking of the personal realm, of course, because my knowledge in the political and social realms was obvious, encyclopedic, exhaustive. I survived years behind the mike on information and wit. But in the bedroom?

Start with Linda, legitimate wife. Second, to be honest, but the first was so long ago and so obscure, we can forget her; I usually do. Linda Donnelly, a woman of chilly decorum, holder of a royal flush of platinum cards, a silver BMW, a sable coat, a Connecticut farm, a Manhattan apartment—formerly my principal residence—and a condo in Naples, Florida. An acquisitive lady, but, like Caesar's wife, beyond reproach, patient, dignified, ruthless.

How do I know that? How can I be so sure? Look at this. I've got evidence right here in this folder which never leaves my side. Copies of phone records, bills, bank statements. What do I see in this paper trail? I see calls to Margaret, my invaluable producer and mistress.

Of course, they knew each other; that's not the story. At best, it's an old story. Margaret's a wonderful producer, a workhorse, shrewd as they come, and calls were not uncommon, not during working hours, because my Linda always had a sense of entitlement. No time was sacred for her, and calls on any number of trivial subjects could be expected as a way of showing the flag and pulling rank.

But these! Do you see these? Evenings. Evening calls. She was suspicious, you say. She was calling to check up on Margaret, on Margaret's company. No, no, Linda was not so curious, and, here's the thing. They were calls made when I was home! On her cell phone.

I think I saw her at it once. I was at the farm for the weekend, in the study done up with old barn boards, leather chairs, and sporting prints by the decorator of the moment, a swishy thug

named Javier. I'm working up one of the little monologues I'm so famous for, when I look out onto the terrace. Linda's standing with her cell phone in the dappled evening shade, half hidden by lilies in porcelain tubs like the serpent in the garden. I think I was suspicious even then.

"Who were you calling?" I asked. Casually, sure. No heavy, jealous husband. "I thought we were going to leave the phone off the hook this weekend."

"Just Javier," she said. "I want some new drapes."

She lied about that. I've consulted the phone records and credit card bills, and I've seen no new drapes, and neither has any of the staff. I've checked with them, every single one. She wasn't calling Javier, the gold plated decorator; she was calling Margaret.

Margaret Ainsley. Six feet tall if she's an inch, an Amazon, a golfer, a swimmer, a sailor. Some days I miss her. I do. At the beach in the late afternoon when it's probably too late for Shelley but too early for meal call, I miss Margaret. She is not as pretty as Shelley, not as elegant as Linda, but smarter than both. Humorous and quick, very quick. The one who loved me. The sky darkens over the water in late afternoon, and I think of sailing on the Sound and remember how she made me laugh.

Twenty years we worked together. She produced the show for the last fifteen, and we were an item for most of that time. Wonderful companion, Margaret, with only one blind spot: She expected me to divorce Linda, which was not *on* at all. In my job, you can run around, but divorce cuts your credibility, not to mention your bank account.

Besides, Linda was useful to me in her own way, a star on the charity circuit, a dynamite organizer, a stylish consort. She wasn't interesting but she wasn't unreasonable. If she spent money, she spent it well, and she didn't ask for anything else from me. I could live with that.

Margaret wanted both passion and permanence. I declined; there would have been demands. Even when I got her to accept the advantages of the arrangement as it was, she still expected fidelity. I have her letters here. Margaret wasn't as careful as Linda. E-mails, too, I saved. Did me no good at the time, but I haven't given up, not even in my present difficult circumstances, because you never know.

When the thing for Shelley developed, I made a big effort with Margaret. Do you suppose she gives me credit for that? Did she take that into her calculations? I sent her flowers, gave her better jewelry, a bigger stake in the company—a fatal error there. But my

good intentions came to nought. Shelley was so pretty, so young, a believer, too.

With Margaret, talk radio's a business; with Linda, a racket. That's how she referred to my work: The Racket. Shelley believed in what I was doing, saw the glamour in it, loved it, admired me. I couldn't resist.

Office phone records: I've got them in my hand. Calls—pay attention now, here's the crucial thing, the thing I haven't been able to get anyone to credit—calls from Margaret to Linda. How do you like that? Brief. Seconds only. Careful, but not careful enough; Troyman can see they were up to something. Here, look back three years, four years of records.

Are there any calls from Margaret's personal phone to Linda Donnelly? Exactly one a year acknowledging receipt of annual birthday potted orchid and Godiva chocolates. And then—look at this—five calls, six calls, a total of eleven calls in three weeks. When? Just before the catastrophe.

Suggestive, right? Oh, they had excuses. I'd been acting erratically, they said. The two of them, those two Medeas, had been concerned. *The obsession—their word, not mine—with Shelley Phillips, so uncharacteristic, so troubling. To Ms. Phillips as well. She was in tears one day right in the studio about Troy's advances.* Et cetera, et cetera. My advances! If I was advancing, Shelley was retreating like Pickett's charge. The damn hypocrites!

Oh, you can say what you like, but my ladies were smooth and cool; top quality Dairy Queens. They claimed they had to keep in touch for my sake. Everything, always, for my sake. Even now. I tremble to think how much they've done for my sake. I have the records, I know about the calls, I can almost hear them. What are they saying? Any day now I'll know. I'll hear them clearly.

Details, that's the thing. Recover the details. Troyman on the hunt! Think, think back to that halcyon, innocent time. Everything's perfect. Linda's decorating the houses, Margaret's producing the show, Shelley's meeting me for breakfast and opening her apartment door to me for a drink after work. Everything in its place and everything great.

When did it begin to go wrong? I know. It was the day Shelley says to me, "You know I want to get married before I'm twenty-six or seven," as if she's sure I'll take the hint. I feel cold. Time for facts of life: Linda, the show, my reputation for gravitas. I omit her mentor and good buddy, Margaret, perhaps a mistake, but I'm concentrating on the essentials. Shelley snivels in her handkerchief and her darling eyes fill up. I pat her hand. I'm thinking of a very

nice bracelet at Tiffany's. Classy, but young. There were matching earrings, too, which I decide will be necessary. I call from the office and order a set.

Mistake. Expensive presents leave records; Tiffany kept the delivery address. I should have taken the package myself. I should have. Should I be condemned for one mistake? Just one mistake, my friends.

There's something else, another piece of the puzzle, which I've almost got worked out. What was it? Scan the surf, don't neglect the passing parade of the bronzed and burning. There's a blonde, something in her walk. There's nothing to say Shelley couldn't have dyed her hair, changed her style—probably would have—but no. Be careful today. I have to be sure, be certain.

Yes, now I remember. Day of the tears. I'm just walking into the studio and I hear sobbing. Something tells me it's Shelley. I'm concerned, sure, we're nearing air time. I'm thinking I don't need this complication, when I hear my producer's voice.

A case of knowledge ignored—not my ordinary failing. I should have remembered that Margaret was fond of young people, good with interns and new hires. She wanted children and even thought about adopting at one point. You can bet I discouraged that. I could see myself being maneuvered into back door stepdad, not a role for Troyman. I tried paternity with Wife Number One of Blessed Oblivion and I've been paying for it ever since.

I walk by Margaret's office, fearing the worst and set to employ my noted finesse, when she closes the door on a tearful Shelley, who's standing with a wad of tissues in one hand. A significant tableau, but who's a mind reader? At the time, what I saw was hysteria and inconvenience, tension in the studio, and a major screwup on some campaign funding data, courtesy of Ms. Phillips's little crisis.

Just the same, that day was the start of something. I know it was. The start of phone calls, mysterious bank withdrawals, obscure payments. To Javier, the decorator, Linda claimed, and Javier, smooth as Valvoline and with enough names for a Spanish grandee, lied through his teeth for her.

I've wanted to see Margaret's bank records, too. Every chance I get, I tell my lawyers, *go after her*. They say I should stop worrying the case and relax. They say phone calls, a weeping girl, a dubious decorator, and the absence of drapes prove nothing. Maybe not, but Shelley disappeared within three weeks. She abandoned her apartment with everything she owned except for the fluffy silver fox coat I'd bought her, the one that made her look like a deluxe



chorus girl. I've tried to get my lawyers to see the significance of the coat. They say it was November; they say she had to wear something. They even hint that she was likely to have worn it to meet me. And these are my lawyers!

The police were no more imaginative, except in their interest in the Troyman. When they finally got involved they found Shelley's apartment untouched. I'd made sure of that. No sign of violence, no blood, and no fingerprints except hers and yours truly, who, admittedly, used to stop by for a drink after the drive time show and who, yes, kept certain personal items in her bathroom. Is this a federal offense? Consenting adults, et cetera.

Someone she knew, said the police. Who did she know in the big bad city? Troyman. Old enough to be her father.

Just the same, no evidence of wrongdoing. No evidence of disaster. Let me repeat, no evidence at all, not one iota, just innuendo, just the rhetoric of suggestion. I knew all the tricks in that department. What I hadn't realized was that Linda and Margaret knew them, too.

Linda stood by me and wept on camera. Of course, it's not the first time, she said. A man of his charm, his charisma. And she was so pretty and ambitious. And young, not the sort of girl who's going to be content with an office romance.

I couldn't have done better myself. She stood by me, all right, gently lowering the noose over my head and, when she'd gotten the tension just right, filed for divorce.

Margaret took a slightly different tack; she said she was protecting the program, enhancing our drive time concept with some serious human interest. She set herself up as Shelley's advocate and kept the focus relentlessly on our missing employee with a regular segment called "The Shelley Watch." Margaret offered a huge reward for information and talked up our missing researcher's sweetness and intelligence.

I fell in with this, particularly in the early days when I was sick and afraid every morning with the newspapers and every afternoon with the Internet and every evening with the news. Always expecting the worst, a body, some horror, that perky chorus girl coat soaked in blood. It was easy to say my only thoughts were for her safe return. Simple truth!

But was it that simple for Margaret, who was already cultivating my replacement? I know she was for a fact. No wonder I became, well, intemperate. And then Linda, what about my Linda, with her cash withdrawals and her permanent malice? Who was she paying off? Some hitman, possibly?

I voiced the idea, though I'd have been better to keep my mouth shut. I see that now; this was one situation talking couldn't improve. My martyred spouse, a connoisseur of the moral highlands, murmured "mid-life crisis," while Margaret, more legalistic, suggested libel. Not appreciating the subtlety of my two Medeas, I wasted time on Javier, the decorator, who had Brooklyn connections and could get good stuff cheap.

I hired a detective, sicced lawyers on the slippery bastard—nothing. I concluded I'd been mistaken. Maybe, after all, Shelley had offended the wrong person, trusted the wrong guy in a bar, ventured to a rendezvous with urban crime. Not impossible, eh? Plausible, even. Much more plausible than the idea that Troyman had risked everything to throttle her. I stuck to logic and tried to claw my way out of the mud, but the Medeas had done too good a job.

The day I met with the suits, I changed my mind again. That was the day I was out: No more drive time with Troyman, the work of a generation destroyed. I stopped by Margaret's office to break the news, although I'm sure now she already knew. She was on the phone when I stepped inside. "... just for the three of us," I heard her say, then she saw me and she hung up fast.

"If only they'd found Shelley, I'd have been cleared," I told her.

"Would you?" asked Margaret. I look back and try to read her expression. Between makeup and Botox, who knows what women are thinking anymore.

"Don't you believe me?" I asked. Even with all that had happened, I still thought she'd believe me. After all those years.

"I don't know who you can believe any more."

"I'm not even sure she's dead."

"You think everyone's lying?"

"Suppose she had a breakdown, suppose she just chucked the whole thing and went to Aruba?"

Margaret's eyes were cool, and she didn't seem nervous. "Might as well suppose you got away with it," she said.

That's when I noticed a champagne bottle, a magnum of Moët with fancy gold ribbons bowed like a chrysanthemum at the neck.

"Kind of early to be toasting my replacement." I was strongly tempted to sweep the bottle off her desk.

"Successful completion of a project," Margaret said. "Everything's not always about you."

How do you like that! In my hour of need, Troyman *in extremis*, that was the last conversation we had. After twenty years, she had nothing more to say to me.

I went home to the apartment, packed my bags. I figured a couple weeks in the South, playing golf, hitting the beach, letting them try drive time without the Troyman, and preparing for my return. Linda had been staying in Connecticut, putting distance between herself and her errant spouse. More or less to annoy her, I drove up the day before I left.

There was an early snow that fall, just a dusting, and the old farmhouse looked very Currier & Ives. Because of the weather, I pulled around to put the car in the garage, and went in by the kitchen: Currier & Ives meets Martha Stewart with six figures worth of cabinetry, granite counters, limestone floor, and a big furniture-type island. A magnum of Moët champagne tied with a gold ribbon was sitting in plain sight. Same paper, same store, same ribbon decoration. *Completion of a successful project.* They'd both been in on it, and probably Shelley, too. I started yelling for Linda.

She wasn't pleased to see me. She mentioned our separation agreement and, when I asked about the champagne, told me to save my conspiracy theories for The Racket. She was doing a divorce renovation, she said, and the bottle of champagne was for Javier, who was bringing some kitchen designs.

The Moët broke with a satisfying crash. Satisfying, just like the look of terror on Linda's face as she reached for the phone, set to threaten me with 911 and lawyers and the rural constabulary, calls destined never to be completed. Later, I drove to JFK, I'm sure I did. I know I did. How else would I be here? I drove to JFK, caught a flight, and voila! Troyman on the beach.

Why here? Remember my facts. Remember the Medeas. I think, I know, that Shelley disappeared with cash in hand. She liked the sun, hated the cold—and is still fond of me, I know she is. How long can she be loyal to the Medeas? How long? How long would be needed? And then where else but here?

I turn off the radio and sit up. Three o'clock. People are starting to fold their chairs and blankets, close their umbrellas. They'll pass me smelling of salt and sun oil and certain powerful meds. I see a few late arrivals straggling in, students coming for a swim after school, workers who have blown off that last hour of work. Troyman alert, feeling lucky.

And yes! I see her down the beach, right at the water's edge. I see her! Someone new. She's walking along in a bright yellow bikini, her dark hair under a straw hat. I've got her. I run after her, but I'm smart. I don't speak until I'm fairly close to her. "Shelley," I say, "Shelley?"

She glances around, her eyes shadowed by her glasses, but

continues walking, kicking up the purling, shallow water. Shelley liked childish games.

"Shelley, Shelley Phillips!" I'm so sure, I catch her arm.

She flinches away. "Let me go! You know contact isn't allowed."

I ask if the champagne was good, if the money's still coming through regularly. Because I'm standing between her and the guard kiosk, she tries to back away into the surf.

"Look," she says, "you're getting seriously out of line."

I explain I'm Troyman, Troy Donnelly, twenty million listeners and a dominant market share, though, of course, she already knows that, having helped prepare the stats.

"Shelley, sweetie, I understand your point of view, but I can't get back to drive time unless and until you come clean and sink the two Medeas. We're talking my career, my whole life," I say, and though I'm talking pretty loudly, I still hear the guard's warning shouts.

Two of them this time in their green scrub suits, hiding the red trunks I know they're wearing.

*Should have warned you. He's fine inside, but outside . . . Come on, Mr. Donnelly.*

*He had his hands around my neck!*

*Yeah, but he's fine inside. Get him inside and he's a pussycat, aren't you, Mr. Donnelly?*

They're talking about Troyman. I'm not listening. Another little mistaken ID, but tomorrow I'll find Shelley and get back where I belong.

*Always worse after his wife's visited. Almost killed her. We really should keep her from coming, but she's so devoted. Sad, really.*

"My evidence? Where's my evidence? My legal folders?"

*Hand me those papers. See he has them at all times. Otherwise major agitation. "Here they are, Mr. Donnelly."*

The Medeas will try anything to get that folder from me. Bribe the guards, sneak up on me at the beach. I have to watch them. But they haven't succeeded yet, and they won't. Troyman is too smart for them. Tomorrow when I find Shelley, when I spot Shelley, they'll be toast. You'll see. ♣

# THORNS

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KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

**I**t started on an unseasonably hot May afternoon. The air was as thick as a Midtown July. I'd already brought the exotics inside—much as I hated to, since exotics lured the casual buyer, the out-of-towner, the newly arrived soon-to-be-jaded Manhattanite. Exotics were what they expected from the city. Something unusual, something strange, everything they wanted available for a price.

The shop's interior was as cool as it could be with the front door open. In the summer I kept the air at frigid, but I didn't have the budget for that in May. So I had the air at luke-cool and kept the misters running. The plants would survive a day or two of this, and if the weather stayed the same, I'd have to spring for the extra electricity.

I was rearranging everything when she came inside. I saw her in the big, round shoplifter's mirror I'd installed long about 1985; before then, I thought that my mirrored cases protecting the most fragile blossoms would give me enough reflection to prevent the occasional theft.

Then I was naïve enough to wonder who would steal plants. After all, resale was hard. But four teenagers with their eyes rolling inside their sockets from some drug I couldn't identify, waving semiautomatics and shouting, *Mister, hey, Mister, open the goddamn cash register*, changed my focus on security forever.

She peered through the fronds of an apartment fern, bumped a bucket of past-their-prime rosebuds, and somehow managed to knock over—and catch—some pansy starts I saved for the locals who liked to put them in their window boxes.

I watched her work her way to the counter, not liking the long white box she carried under one arm. She slammed the box on the counter and looked around, hoping to find someone who would answer questions or take a complaint. I sighed as softly as I could, left the calla lilies I'd been shearing for a funeral in the Village, and headed toward her, trying not to let my reluctance show on my face.



She was slender and almost pretty, with honey brown hair that marked her as a non-native New Yorker. Her lower lip was chapped—either she bit it too much or no one had taught her about Chap Stick—and her skin was that blotchy pale most white New Yorkers managed to sustain year round.

She shoved the box at me. It was long and dented, with a dirt stain on the side, as if it'd been thrown or dropped onto the street. A gold sticker with the shop's name in italic script held the box closed.

I touched the edge, felt the familiar ridged cardboard, wondered if I'd find the roses I customarily put inside or something else, something worse.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, pretending I hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"Don't send me any more of those." She shoved the box again. Her hand was shaking. I got the sense that her anger covered a deeper emotion, one I couldn't yet identify.

I slipped my finger between the box's lid and its interior, felt the softness of tissue paper, just like I would have expected from our store. With a single movement, I flicked the box open.

A dozen white roses, an expensive item at this time of year. They were wrapped in red tissue, just a smattering of baby's breath behind them, and some green fronds to give it all color.

A beautiful package. I'd worked on it myself. I had tied the white silk ribbon around the stems just that morning.

"You don't care for roses?" I asked.

"I don't care for *him*." She shoved the box a third time. It slid halfway off the counter, and I had to catch it before the flowers spilled onto the floor.

"Ma'am, this is probably something you should take up with the gentleman—"

"I would if I could," she snapped, "but I don't know who he is. He's stalking me."

I felt the fine hairs on the back of my neck rise. I fumbled inside the tissue for the card I remembered placing there.

I found it. One of the simpler ones with green leaves running along the side.

*My heart is true*, it said in my handwriting.

"You've seen him. You tell him to leave me alone." Her trembling had moved from her hands to her face. Her eyes filled with tears and she blinked angrily. Her lashes got wet, but the tears didn't fall.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't see him. This was a phone order."

I knew that much from the fact that I had written the card.



"Taken with a credit card?" she asked.

"Probably," I said. "I would have to check."

"Well, don't take any more, especially not for me." She whirled, stumbled into one of my taller orchids, and grabbed the pot as if it were a lifeline.

I came around the desk, balanced the orchid, and put a hand on her back. Her muscles were rigid. She pulled away from me, glaring at me as she did.

"I'll do what I can," I said. "I'll need your name and address just to make sure."

She nodded, wiped a hand over her face, then mumbled, "Ruth-Anne Grant."

"Miss Grant, I'll make sure he doesn't send you any more flowers from here. Would you like me to give his information to the police?"

She blinked. I saw her expression clear as the idea reached her mind. I knew what she was going to ask before she asked it.

"Can you give the information to me?"

"Not his credit card information," I said. "I do have a name, though. Would you like that?"

"And a phone number?"

I wasn't sure of the ethics of that. "For that, I'd have to talk to the police."

She nodded, expression tight. "The name then. The name's a start."

I moved the orchid away from her, then went back to my desk. The desk was in the back, near the workstation I used for more elaborate orders. The easy orders I prepared out front so that customers and passersby could watch if they so wished.

There was a large glass window that opened into the store, so that I could see the customers, and above that, the images from several security cameras that I bought last year.

Ruth-Anne Grant wandered through my orchids, touching the fragile blooms despite the signs that warned her not to, and looking at the other plants that covered every available space in the store. Outside, a young couple holding hands examined one of the apartment-sized palm trees that stood just under the awning.

If this were a normal afternoon, I would have gone out and asked them if they were interested in a plant to liven up their home. But it wasn't a normal afternoon. Ruth-Anne Grant's revelation had made certain of that.

Twenty years ago I gave up my law practice to open a flower shop. I had discovered that I wasn't tough enough for the law, but

I loved plants. I thought of flowers as a way of delivering joy or comfort. I spent extra time on bouquets for lovers, and when I designed funeral arrangements, I tried to give them a special touch, so that the bereaved would see the sympathy I had for them.

I never thought my gift would be used to terrorize someone.

My fingers were shaking as I sat behind the desk. My computer slept, the dark screen running the shop's logo against a backdrop of lilies.

I used the mouse to wake up the machine, then I went into the day's order files. I searched by recipient. My software was so well designed (thanks to a former lover) that I found Ruth-Anne's order quickly, even though I'd had a very busy morning.

The information rose in front of me like a rap sheet. The flowers were ordered by a Dwight Rhodes, and he paid with a platinum American Express card. He lived in SoHo. I recognized the address as one of the newer co-ops that had sprung up in recent years.

There was nothing in his information that would have made me suspicious. I didn't even wonder why he came to my shop, which was nowhere near his home. A lot of people walked past here on their way to work; I would simply have figured if I had even thought about it at all that he was one of them.

As a double measure, I checked Ruth-Anne Grant's address. She lived in the Village, one of those twisty neighborhoods with funky apartments and a lot of local color. I wondered how Rhodes had first seen her—whether they worked near each other, or had stumbled into each other at some restaurant.

I checked the in-store window. Ruth-Anne was waiting by the counter now, leaning away from the roses as if they might poison her.

I scrawled his name down, then shut down the program before heading out front.

"Here," I said, handing her the paper, not wanting to speak his name aloud. "This is the man who ordered your flowers."

She stared at the paper for a long time. She had stopped shaking. In fact, she seemed calmer now than she had when she had entered the shop.

Outside, the couple shook their heads and walked on. A woman wearing black fondled the wisteria I had wrapped around a clay statue. A man leaned against a lamp post, drinking bottled water, and watched her examine the plant.

"Could you tell me anything else?" Ruth-Anne had looked up from the paper. The blotchiness had left her skin. Now it was just

pale. I could see exhaustion in her features, exhaustion so deep I wondered how she could function from day to day.

"I just don't feel right giving you anything else," I said. "I'm not even sure I should have given you his name."

"Just tell me this," she said. "Does he live in Manhattan?"

I nodded.

"Near me?"

I figured I could give her that much. I shook my head no.

"Is he Uptown or—"

"I can't," I said. "Really. I'll talk to the police. I'll give them everything they need. Just send them in here, and they'll take care of it."

Her mouth closed, her lips tight over her teeth, almost as if she were physically holding the words back. She took a deep breath, obviously gathering herself, and then she extended her hand.

"You've been a lot of help. I'm sorry I was so upset when I came in."

I took her hand. She was so thin that I could feel the bones beneath her skin. "Anyone would be under the circumstances."

She nodded, then slipped her hand out of mine. She headed toward the front of the store.

I scurried around the counter and said, "Wait."

She turned.

I grabbed a small pot of pansy starts. "Here," I said. "Take this."

Ruth-Anne frowned. "What for?"

"I just—don't want you think of flowers as bad things. These'll grow in your kitchen window or on your balcony. If you let them, they'll take care of you all summer."

She studied them for a moment, just like she had studied the paper. Then she took them from me.

"Thank you," she said, and she smiled. The smile gave her a bit of life, made me see what she had been like before this entire ordeal started. "I had forgotten how kind people can be."

And then she left.

I stood among the pansy starts for another ten minutes, just staring outside my shop. The mists came on once, caught me in their spray, and eased some of the heat. People wandered by on the sidewalk, sometimes touching, always admiring the plants.

The man, leaning against the lamp post, finished his bottle of water and went inside the deli next door. A teenager skateboarded by, leaping off the curb so that he avoided my display.

I went back to my arrangement, but my heart wasn't in it. Instead, I grabbed the roses from the box, removed the damaged ones, and put them in a bucket of water.

I grabbed a sign from my desk drawer—FREE. TAKE ONE—and taped it to the bucket. Then I put the bucket outside.

As I did, a woman who looked wilted from the heat stopped in front of me.

"Free?" she said. "Really?"

"Really."

She picked up the most perfect rose and rubbed it against her cheek, her eyes half closed.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you."

And then she walked away.

I smiled, feeling better. Then I went back inside, feeling refreshed enough to give everything I had to finishing the funeral arrangement before my delivery guy showed up.

**T**he police arrived two days later.

Rain had broken the heat, and spring had returned to the city. My shop door was open, like it had been during the heat wave, but now cool breezes blew through, albeit cool breezes smelling of auto exhaust and garlic-ginger from the Asian-synth restaurant on the corner.

I knew from the moment the two men entered the store that they weren't customers. My customers browse. They touch leaves, sniff flowers, run hands lovingly on clay pots. These men strode in, coats flaring behind them. Plants trembled in their wake.

I watched from the counter, my finger hovering above the panic alarm I had installed after the teenager incident. If the men tried anything, I'd press the button and a siren would blare. I would use that moment to duck and run to the back, hoping I could make it out of the store before the men realized where I had gone.

They were both white with black hair and chiseled faces that would have been attractive if they hadn't had such hard lines. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, and beneath the coats, the bulge of shoulder holsters that hid guns.

The taller one reached me first. He had a flare of gray at his temples that softened the hard edge. If I had met him in a bar, I might have bought him a drink, hoping for some conversation before we had a dance or two. But I could tell from his posture that he was the kind of man who would never dance with another man. The only way he would enter the bars I frequented would be by accident.

"Mr. Shelton?" His voice was deep, authoritative. I jumped in spite of myself.

My hand trembled over that button, even though I knew at that point that this man was not going to rob me. "Yes?"

He flashed a badge at me. I struggled to see it clearly. My finger remained near the button.

"I'm Detective Whittig. This is Detective Barret." Whittig indicated the shorter man who had stopped behind him. They both stared at me.

My hand had moved away from the button.

"May I see your badge again?" I asked, glad that my voice sounded calmer than I felt.

Whittig opened the badge wallet and I peered inside. It looked official enough.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Two days ago, you ran a stolen credit card to pay for some flowers."

I probably did that more often than I realized, but no cops had ever visited me because of it.

"No credit card company has contacted me," I said.

"They wouldn't." The second detective, Barret, had one of those dry voices that sounded sarcastic even when he wasn't trying to be.

"It's common procedure to have a stolen card denied," I said, "or to be contacted by the credit card company if the transaction is unusual. Two days is a long time. I would have heard."

"Maybe normally," Whittig said, "but this isn't normal."

"Perhaps you'd better fill me in, then," I said. "Why wouldn't I have heard?"

"Because the cardholder is dead," Barret said. "He couldn't report it missing."

I frowned. "Even so, the credit card companies monitor transactions. They should have noticed something unusual."

"There's nothing unusual about buying flowers from a neighborhood vendor," Whittig said. "I'm sure someone would've noticed the card was missing if it'd been used more than the once. But it wasn't. It hasn't been used at all since two days ago."

"So how do you think I can help you?" I asked. "Would you like me to look up the record? If the card was stolen, I probably won't have much you can go on."

Barret looked pointedly at my mirrors and the single camera hidden behind an extremely well-tended spider plant. "Maybe you got video of the person who used the card?"

"Two days ago?" I nodded. "I keep the tapes for months."

"Holy Christ," Whittig said to Barret. "Someone who actually follows the security company's directions."

"I've had a few bad experiences," I said. "I do everything I can to make sure I don't have any more. If you give me a name, I can look up the transaction, see what time it occurred, and give you the pertinent video."

Whittig nodded. "Let's do that."

He glanced at his partner. Barret didn't seem to have an objection.

"His name was Dwight Rhodes," Barret said.

I froze for perhaps a half second, maybe less. It felt like an eternity, like I had guilt written all over my face. Guilt and fear and something else—something I hadn't experienced in a long, long time.

Horror. I felt horror.

"Rhodes," I said, somehow managing to keep my voice even. "Dwight."

"Yes." Whittig was watching me. "Do you know him?"

"If he shopped here, he was an acquaintance." I retreated to primness. "The name doesn't ring any bells."

I hoped they couldn't see the lie.

"That's R-O-A-D-S?" I asked.

"No." Barret used that dry voice again. "R-H-O-D-E-S, like rhododendron."

"All right." I sounded just a little too hardy now. They had to know something was up. "I'll check that for you. The main order computer is in the back."

"Mind if we come with you?" Whittig asked.

"Actually—" I started to say that I did, then I stopped myself. Much as I wanted to look this information up alone, I didn't want two police officers in the front of my store discouraging business. "I don't mind at all."

I led them into the back. It smelled of greenery, of the lilac shipment that had just come, in as well as the last of the Easter lilies. Bouquets, some half finished, littered my worktable, and two orders still waited for customer pick-up in their white floral boxes.

I tapped the computer, hoping I was wrong about the name, that it wasn't the one I had given Ruth-Anne Grant. The detectives leaned over me, crowding me. I could hear their breathing, raspy and out of sync.

I found the records from two days before, and of course, there it was, the name, Dwight Rhodes, big as life. His SoHo address was there, along with his phone number and the stolen credit card.

"That's it," Barret said unnecessarily.

I opened the file, revealing the order, the time it had come in, and when I had processed it.

Whittig swore. "Phone order."

I sat there, unable to move. My mouth was dry. I had given this man's name to Ruth-Anne Grant. She had been in bad shape.

She had thought he was her stalker.

And now he was dead, with detectives here, following up.

"Can we have a printout of that anyway?" Barret asked.

The printout would lead them to Ruth-Anne Grant. She was the one who got the flowers; she was the one who returned them. Even if she hadn't done anything, she would still tell them about her visit here.

About what I had done.

I used the key controls to hit print, and heard my printer snap to life a few yards away. The detectives had turned their attention to it; I was no longer of any use to them.

"I take it," I said, wishing that I could banish the primness from my voice forever, "this Rhodes was murdered."

Both detectives turned back to me, identical movements, bringing them closer and adding to that claustrophobic feeling.

"Didn't we say that?" Barret asked. "I thought we said that."

"We might have said he was just dead." Whittig's tone told me that he knew full well what they had said, that it had been deliberate.

"So he was," I said. "Murdered. In the last two days. Right?"

I was still staring at the screen. Both men were reflected in it. They looked at each other over my head.

"What's it to you?" Whittig asked.

"Because," I said, the primness finally gone, my voice shaking, "I might have made a big mistake."

"You knew him?" Barret asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if I ever met him. But I gave his name away."

"His name?" Whittig sounded confused. "To who?"

The printer beeped. The paper had run out. I stood, grabbed some paper from the storage shelf, and put it in the paper tray. Then I manually restarted the printer. The order spit out, quickly and cleanly.

I handed it to Barret, and pointed to the sentiment on the card.

"I gave his name to Ruth-Anne Grant," I said, wishing I didn't have to say anything, wishing this had never happened. "She thought he was stalking her."

It felt like I had passed a death sentence on someone, like I had been the person who had stood up in a large theater, pointed at a woman I'd only met once, and shouted, "Unclean!"

I could tell just from the looks on their faces that the cops



thought they had their killer. Hell, I believed it too. The coincidence was too much. I'd learned a lot about investigations and coincidence and the ways crimes were committed in my old job, and I knew the odds favored Ruth-Anne Grant over everyone else.

They were going to talk to Ruth-Anne, and they would push her and poke at her and make her say things she may not mean. And she would no longer be the victim of a stalking. She'd be the perpetrator of a crime.

I stood and went back to my computer, feeling like I hadn't had any sleep. Detached, tired, empty. I shuffled across the floor and brushed against tables, nearly knocking over a globe filled with late-season forced narcissus.

I caught it, held it, feeling the bubble glass in my hands. It would be so easy to crush the globe, feel the bulbs and squeeze them to death as well.

Life was so hard to cultivate, so easy to destroy.

**I**t felt like I had passed a death sentence on someone.

I set the globe on the rough-hewn antique table I used for my more fragile vases.

The door opened and I whirled, careful to miss the tables this time, although I brushed part of a palm and broke off a branch. For half a moment, I feared the cops were back.

They weren't. Stan, my delivery driver, stood in the doorway, looking at me with great annoyance. He was young, early thirties, and had visions of being a Broadway star.

He had the beauty for it, but not the chops. I'd seen him off-off-off-Broadway, and he was so wooden that I was embarrassed. Still, one couldn't fault a man for his dreams. And with the money he earned from this, and his two other jobs, he paid for lessons at one of the acting academies on the Upper West Side.

"I knocked in back. Pounded in fact, and you didn't even bother. I'm half an hour behind now. I couldn't leave the truck back there and you know how hard it is finding parking up front."

"I'm sorry," I said. "The cops were here."

He flushed as if he were the one they were after. "Cops? You okay?"

"I don't know," I said, surprised that I made the admission. I never talked much with Stan. He was too attractive, too young, and frankly, a bit too dumb for me. I didn't want to get involved in anything more than the employer-employee friendship we seemed to already have.

"Nobody broke in, did they?" He had been driving for me when those kids came in with the shotguns. In fact, he was the one who helped me clean up the store.

I shook my head. "One of my customers was murdered."

I guess I could call Dwight Rhodes that, even though I knew he had never really been a customer. At least, not voluntarily.

"Damn, boss, I'm sorry."

I nodded, and decided that I had to move.

"I only have three deliveries this afternoon," I said, and hoped it was true. I couldn't remember any of the orders I'd taken. Everything left my brain when the police came through that door. "But if you finish early, check with me one last time. I'm a bit frazzled."

"No kidding." He pushed his way past the line of herb starts I kept for the locals. "I'd be too."

I knew I could trust him to check back if he had the chance. Stan was good that way. He'd been one of the best employees I ever had, even though he wasn't technically just mine. When I realized that I didn't have enough business to pay for all his delivery runs, I got together with a few other smaller shops. We shared Stan as our delivery driver. It covered his vehicle costs, and it took the burden off our small businesses. None of us counted him as an employee. We all paid him under the table, and he took care of his own costs.

Of course, the only price we paid on that was a future one: If Stan ever got that Broadway job he dreamed of, we'd lose him in the space of an afternoon.

I followed him into the back. He grabbed the largest arrangement, a clichéd spray of carnations and greenery for a funeral, and carried it to the truck. I followed with the daisy basket I'd made for an upscale boutique and the delicate vase filled with the palest pink roses I had. We loaded up the truck and he left, after checking to make sure I was all right.

I said I was, and even I believed the lie. Until I found myself in the back, staring at the damn computer. I wasn't looking at the missed deliveries, even though I had promised myself I would.

I was doing something I should have done that very first day, when Ruth-Anne Grant crossed my threshold.

I should have run a search on her name, seen how many other deliveries she got from me, and who had sent them.

The computer found five, spaced over five months. They came at the same time on the same day of the month, as if the guy had a ritual.

And of course, each name who sent the flowers was different from the last. The bouquets were different too, and so were the

prices, almost as if this mook knew how much was on that credit card he'd stolen and how much he could spend without getting caught.

Roses in May, hyacinths in April, tulips in March, a mixed bouquet in February, and an expensive bonsai—one I had nurtured for nearly a decade—in January. That one broke my heart, as if this stalker had attacked me personally.

If Ruth-Anne Grant knew the bonsai was from the stalker, she had probably thrown it out.

All that work, all that love, lost.

Just like Dwight Rhodes was lost.

I did another search, this time for the names on the credit cards, to see if the stalker had used them more than once. He hadn't, and they had never shopped here.

Then I printed out the Ruth-Anne Grant order files. As they chugged out of my too-slow ink-jet printer, I studied them. Phone orders each one, each with a romantic message, each sent anonymously.

And those dates . . .

They weren't really enough to let a woman know she had anything more than a secret admirer. What made a woman think she had a stalker? Frequent, persistent attention. Phone calls. Letters. Gifts.

Many, many gifts.

And clearly this guy wasn't one who liked face-to-face contact. He ordered with false names and left no fake name on his deliveries.

The only other things I could tell about him were obvious: he had opportunity to get other people's credit cards without them reporting the theft to the credit card companies, and he knew his flowers. He bought what was in season.

Frequent, persistent gifts. Once a month wasn't frequent enough, and Ruth-Anne Grant's anger made me think the flowers were a theme.

Persistent. That much was clear. But smart enough to cover his tracks over and over again. With the credit cards, with the names, with the anonymous messages.

I gripped the papers, still hot from my printer, and sank into a nearby chair. Ruth-Anne Grant hadn't been lying about the stalker.

I whirled in my chair, grabbed the phone, and dialed Flowers by the Book, a boutique book and flower shop nearby. We shared Stan, and I liked to talk to the owner, Odele Page, an opinionated woman in her mid fifties.

I explained the situation, leaving the murder and the police out of it, by saying that I thought maybe a client of mine had a stalker, and would she look up the client's name, see if she had anything on file with anonymous cards, and fax me the information.

She offered to do it then and there, on the phone. I cradled the receiver between my ear and my shoulder as I moved around the back, too stressed to stay still. I checked the mirrors and the door, making certain I was alone.

All the while, I listened to her computer system beep and ping, her fingers tapping lightly on the keys. She would sigh and then sigh again, and finally she gasped.

"Ruth-Anne Grant," Odele said, and recited the address.

I stopped between the blue vases and the white ceramics I bought from a local artist. "That's the one."

"I've sent her something the first week of every month since December."

"On an exact date?" I asked.

She paused for a moment, and I heard the sounds of keys again. "Looks like as close to the third as possible."

Mine were around the twelfth.

"Can you fax me the information?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "It seems private."

"The only private thing on there is Ruth-Anne Grant's address, and I already have that," I said. "The rest has got to be stolen credit cards and false personal information."

Still, Odele hesitated.

"Look, Odele, all I'm going to do is give this information to the police. I hope that they'll go after this guy, whoever he is. Can I at least tell them to contact you?"

"I'll fax you," she said, and hung up. I smiled. I had figured she might respond like that. Odele was, after all, a typical former hippie, aversion to the police and all.

Odele wasn't my only phone call. I contacted all the other florists who shared Stan. A few of them hadn't heard of Ruth-Anne Grant, but a few others had, all of them near my neighborhood, all of them boutique shops like mine.

Each shop had its particular day, and they were close enough that I began to get a sense of what Ruth-Anne Grant had gone through. She was getting flowers every day of the week, anonymously, for five months—the December offering from Odele being the first.

It was also the most unique: a holiday package of greens, mistletoe, and holly around a large poinsettia. Along with the plants

came a bag of Christmas cookies from a nearby bakery and various teas from all over the world.

But the centerpiece was Odele's specialty, a large-sized, stunning gift book that she had first bought for the previous Valentine's Day: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, with illustrations by well-known New York gallery artists.

Love poems, and love art, along with flowers, sweets, and tea. Anyone would have been happy to receive a present like that. And the first offering would have seemed marvelous—a gift from a mysterious admirer, perhaps even someone Ruth-Anne Grant thought she knew (and secretly hoped cared for her as much as she cared for him).

Over time, though, as the gifts became routine, as she started asking her friends and colleagues who sent them, Ruth-Anne Grant must have realized that the presents which had given her so much pleasure had a sinister undertone to them.

A bell tinkled in the main part of the shop. A young man, no more than twenty-five, stood between the orchids and the eucalyptus, looking lost. He wore a black suit—a Ralph Lauren knock-off by the way it gathered at the seams—and a pale pink shirt. His tie combined both colors in just the way a sales clerk might think was attractive.

He didn't have a lot of money, then, but he had a job that required others to think he had.

I sighed and set down the faxes from the various shops. Normally, I would have bounded into the front room. I loved helping customers.

One of my simple pleasures, which might now be gone. Because as I stood in the back, my fingers stained with the ink from my cheap fax, I found myself wondering who this man, this new customer, wanted to hurt.

I helped him anyway. I made myself smile as I walked out of the back room, and I questioned him like I would any other new customer. We talked about his sister, the one with MS, and how much she loved flowers. We talked about his critically ill mother, who was worried about his sister's care after she was gone, and we talked about his budget, which, as I expected, was tight.

Normally the conversation would have been enough for me, but my mood was so odd, my discomfort so great, I flirted with him—not obviously, but just enough to let him feel the personal interest.

He finally pulled out his wallet and showed me his sister's lat-

est picture. She was younger than he was—high school, still—and cute in that fresh-faced way most teenagers had.

As I studied her, as I saw that spark of intelligence in her eyes, mixed with a touch of sadness, I realized I had seen a lot of family photos over the years.

I handed the wallet back to the young man, undercharged him for two arrangements of spring flowers—one for Mom and one for the sister—and sent him on his way.

Then I stood near my cash register, trying to identify what I was feeling. It was the edge of an idea, a memory, a thought that I had nearly captured just a moment before.

When I was looking at the photograph. When I was realizing how I interviewed all of my new clients.

I would never have sold that bonsai over the phone. I always made it a policy to hand-sell special items, to make certain the customer saw them, and approved of them.

I had talked to him.

He had told me whatever story he had made up—or had he made it up? Had he convinced me of his delusion, that there was some special woman out there for him, some woman he was trying to impress, some woman that he loved?

What would I have told him? Bonsai needed nurturing, a tough hand but a gentle one. Bonsai weren't for everyone, but the person who appreciated them had a botanist's heart.

I wished I had found out more about Ruth-Anne Grant. Something about her, or this sick creep's fantasy of her, convinced him to send her flowers. Convinced him—convinced me—that she deserved a plant that required a commitment.

I shut down the register and hurried to the back, stopping in front of my stack of video tapes.

I had January.

All five weeks of it.

My hand shook as I looked for the date, and when I found it, written across the label in Magic Marker, my heart nearly stopped.

"Gotcha," I said as I pulled the tape out of the pile. "You son of a bitch, I've got you now."

And the hell of it was, I remembered him.

As I watched the tape, images grainy and unfocused, not professional at all, I went back to that afternoon.

It was dark at three. A storm had threatened all day and finally hit, mixing rain, snow, and sleet. I had stood near the window for a long time, moving plants, wishing that the old building that

housed the store had a better heating system and better insulation.

He had come in, black hair dusted with snow, a traditionally handsome man wearing a silk suit that looked, to my inexperienced eye, like Armani. He had the body for the suit, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped—legitimately GQ.

I'd let him browse a bit—sometimes the high-end types stumbled into the wrong store to kill a moment before a meeting—but after a while I realized he was actually shopping, and I went to help him.

He had flirted with me—it was visible on the tape, his hand on my sleeve ever so casual, the way he tilted his head so that he could look into my eyes, the slight smile.

I remembered him, not just because he fit my idea of gorgeous or because we had flirted, but because I had led him to the bonsai. I had talked him into it—for his lover. The lover he had described.

A man.

My hands shook as I searched for that original order form in my stack of faxes. Mine were at the bottom, of course. I should have looked for them there. And sure enough, the evidence was before me.

I hadn't sent that first plant to Ruth-Anne Grant. No, it had gone to R. A. Grant at Ruth-Anne's address. R. A. A deliberate lie.

None of the others were lies. Over the phone, he had ordered flowers for a woman. In person, just that once, he'd told me, convinced me, he was ordering for a man.

I sank into my chair. I no longer try to hide who I am. I learned that lesson long ago the hard way, when I was an upscale defense attorney with an infatuation for the civil litigator down the hall.

He had outed me, vindictively, one afternoon in a staff meeting. I had flirted without realizing what I was doing, hoping that no one saw my infatuation, hoping that no one understood.

And his outing was cruel, in an upstate old boys' club, which in the mid eighties wasn't half as liberal as it thought it was. I wasn't fired; I was shunned, given cases so obviously tailored to forcing me out of the firm that I should have fled in panic.

Instead, I decided to retaliate. I invited the litigator's wife to lunch, and instead of dining with her I gave her flowers. I still remember how her eyes lit up, the way she had smiled at me. It was clear litigator boy hadn't given her flowers in a long time, and she found them special.

And at that moment, I realized I didn't have it—the balls, the



stomach, the cutthroat attitude that made the best attorneys. I couldn't even avenge myself on a man who had made my job hell.

I couldn't take that light from that woman's eyes.

I decided that I couldn't be miserable for the rest of my life trying to be someone I wasn't and I gave it all up. I sold my house, my wardrobe, and my life, and came to Manhattan and bought on a whim a flower shop which I made my own.

Flowers saved people; flowers shouldn't destroy them.

And somehow he—this stalker, this GQ man who was obsessed with another person without regard to that person—somehow he had known who I was, what I believed in, and he subverted it.

He used it to play his little games.

Sometimes with the memory of my past I get a kind of clarity. Not an understanding of who or what I am—I know that deeply now—but a way of seeing the world, the patterns I had learned in law school, the ways that I was supposed to view the world in the adversarial system I had found myself in.

The pattern here, the one that I chose to focus on, was a simple one: In the beginning, this jerk ordered in person. I confirmed it by looking at the various faxes I collected, and it was clear.

Like my bonsai, like Odele's specially book-bound package, each of those first orders had been difficult, the kind of order that was almost impossible to make over the phone.

And because he wasn't thinking like a criminal then, Ruth-Anne's stalker had to have gone into shops he was familiar with. Maybe he had seen me around or talked to me before. I certainly would have flirted with him.

Odele's store wasn't far away, and neither were the others he had used. He lived near here, and he shopped near here, and eventually he gained a system, a system that involved stealing credit cards and using them to place the orders.

He had to have started that before he saw me, though, because the average Armani owner has no need to steal funds, and probably can think of a thousand other ways to cover his tracks. Like cash, for instance. Cash required no names, and wasn't even remarkable. A lot of people paid cash for a bouquet, only to decide at the last minute to have that bouquet delivered.

And there were certainly enough flower shops in the five boroughs to keep a cash-paying stalker in plants for decades.

No, either he had stolen that outfit or—

I paused, frowned, and went back to my video. The graininess

worked against me. I had been so concerned with this guy's face and his expensive clothes that I hadn't looked at his shoes.

Shoes were always the tip-off. Expensive shoes were much more comfortable than cheap ones, so even if a rich guy had no pretensions, he wore good shoes.

To my disgust, the stalker stayed behind tables and large plants. I couldn't get a good image of the shoes—until the last few frames.

When he came over to pay for the bonsai, his shoes appeared briefly in the center of the image.

They were black. But I couldn't tell if they had been polished or not—the tape was too dark. However, these shoes, these so-called expensive men's shoes, had an interesting feature.

They had thick soles, nearly tennis shoe thickness, which implied rubber.

Only one group of people wore shoes like that with clothes like his. Waiters. Bartenders. Guys who were on their feet all day. Retail employees generally didn't have to dress up. And if they did, they got the shoes too because it was all part of the package.

Only in restaurants did guys have to wear the clothes without the matching shoes. Restaurants often ordered outfits for their staff, sometimes one or two, expecting them to wear the clothing on the job and near the building. But they never bought shoes. The waiters bought the shoes themselves, and of course, they couldn't afford the expensive ones. They went to Jersey, shopped in Payless or Wal-Mart or Target, and bought shoes they could afford. Shoes with thick rubber soles so that their feet wouldn't ache quite so bad at the end of the day.

And what else did waiters do? They whisked away credit cards in little leather receipt books, discreetly running the cards behind the bar or in a back room so that the restaurant patrons didn't have to hear the constant chugging of the computerized credit card machine, vomiting out receipt after receipt, authorizing dollars and adding the amounts to a pile of plastic.

An old client of mine used to substitute one credit card for another, giving him a few days of use before the cardholder realized that the platinum Visa in his wallet didn't have his name on it. Ruth-Anne's stalker could have done that, or he could have done something even simpler.

If he was a waiter standing in the back of a restaurant, he could have copied the card number, the expiration date, and the name onto his order pad. Then he could have used those card numbers for phone orders with places like florists. We ran the cards, but we

never checked that the person on the phone was the actual owner of the card.

We never checked because who in their right mind would steal a credit card and order flowers with it?

At least, that was the assumption. And like all assumptions, it was wrong.

I had a full presentation for Detectives Whittig and Barret when they returned: a print-up of the video image, right down to the shoes, faxes of invoices—all made out to Ruth-Anne Grant, a list of restaurants nearby that required its staff to wear silk suits, and a suggested theory as to what had actually happened.

I actually had her stalker's name, but I didn't tell them because I still knew a few things about the law. Any good defense attorney would make it impossible for the prosecutor to use evidence gathered by a citizen like me.

I had made a print of the best video image and showed it around. It only took me a few days to find Ruth-Anne Grant's stalker. His name was Glenn Haines, and he worked at an upscale restaurant between my place and Odele's. It was called Chez Nouveau.

Maybe I kept the name for security. Maybe I did it so that I could make certain that Whittig and Barret got the right guy. Or maybe I did it because I had an inclination to take care of the matter myself.

Even though I never did. That had been Ruth-Anne Grant's mistake. They indicted her on first-degree murder charges the day before I handed over the stalker information. Whittig and Barret seemed so uninterested in catching the stalker that I thought at first they weren't going to follow up.

But they did—not to find the stalker—but to solidify their case against Ruth-Anne Grant. While I'd been thinking like a defense attorney who would use the information to get a jury to acquit, Whittig and Barret were building a case.

If they could prove that Ruth-Anne Grant had a stalker, they had motive for first-degree murder.

Of course, Whittig and Barret never told me that. They just thanked me for the information, did the additional research, and arrested Haines. Then the District Attorney's office, always smarter than I wanted to give them credit for, got an earlier trial date for him.

If he pleaded to the charge or got found guilty, they'd have a paper record for Ruth-Anne Grant's motive.

I couldn't argue because I got Haines off the street. The only good thing in all of this was that Haines wouldn't hassle anyone else. His stalking days would end—at least until he got out of prison.

But it hasn't ended for me.

I dream about Ruth-Anne Grant sometimes. She never speaks. All she does is slam that box of roses down on my counter and then she looks at me, as if I'm the one who stalked her, hurt her, and ultimately destroyed her life.

When I wake up, I try to tell myself that she made the choice. She was the one who didn't do her research to see if Dwight Rhodes had sent her all those flowers. Instead, she had taken her gun and waited for him in the hallway, shooting him before he could even get close.

Her choice, not mine.

But those thoughts never comfort me. Because I remember how harassment feels, how it makes you so very helpless, and how stopping it seems impossible.

And I know how terror feels—not for weeks and months and years, like she went through, but just for a brief instant, when those teenagers, waving those semiautomatics, came into my store and shouted, *Mister, hey, Mister, open the goddamn cash register.*

I haven't been the same since. I still tense when a kid under twenty comes in, and I look over my shoulder when I lock up at night, and I keep my security tapes long past the dates the security company says it's necessary.

I know what terror feels like, and it makes me wonder what I would do to those kids if they kept coming into my store, never hurting me, always threatening me.

And if I ran into them on the street—or, God forbid, some idiot told me their names—I couldn't guarantee, even now, that I wouldn't seek them out and give them a taste, just a taste, of what they gave me.

I used to believe in the law until I realized that the people behind it—me and that civil litigator—were just as flawed as the people before it.

I used to believe in myself until I gave an innocent man's name to a woman who wanted to kill him.

And I used to believe in the healing power of flowers until one unseasonably hot May afternoon, when I learned that even the most fragile blossom can be as potent a weapon as a locked and loaded gun. ♣

# FAKE

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IAIN ROWAN

“**C**hambers, Fraud Squad,” I said, and I flapped my ID wallet open in front of him, not caring whether he looked or not. He didn’t. Mark Rogers stood there, in the middle of his office, hand still raised from when he had marched from behind his desk to ask me what the hell I was doing bursting into his office. He looked at me, and his mouth opened and closed like a fish.

“You must be Mr. Rogers. Time we had a word, I think, Mr. Rogers. A private chat. Or if you like, we could do it out there amongst all of your staff? Or back at the station with me, we do reasonable coffee these days, you know, not like it used to be. Of course, you’d not know, would you, Mr. Rogers? Or would you? Been down the station before? Anyway, your choice. We can do it here, but you have to get the coffee.”

I didn’t give him time to get a word in edgeways, bombarding him with questions while he was still panicking. Standard procedure.

“Whuh—uh, what about—I mean—”

I turned and walked for the door, waving my hand to indicate that he should follow me.

“No! No, I mean, here is fine. Here—I’ll get coffee—Marian makes good coffee—here, please take a seat. I don’t know what this is about, Officer, but I am sure that we can sort it out quickly.”

I turned and walked back to the chair in front of his desk, pulled it out so that it was against one wall, walked behind his desk, and grabbed his deluxe executive swivel chair and wheeled it around the room at speed, nearly running him down with it, making him skip out of the way. I put it next to the other chair. Take him out from behind his desk, take him away from his position of power, his little fortress where he sat safe and smug, hurling arrows down at his staff. Leave him in an unusual place, vulnerable, exposed. I took the swivel chair, left the hard low one for him. Let him have some of his own medicine. He came over, all nerves like a startled deer. Some people are like that with the police, whether they

have anything to hide or not. Most of them do have something to hide though, most of them do.

I waved him away from the chair. He stood there, looked confused.

"I think you said something about coffee, Mr. Rogers? Sorry, but I have been doing a lot of talking this morning, making a lot of phone calls about—certain inquiries, checking certain facts."

"Sorry—coffee—yes." He walked behind his desk, looking flustered, and picked up his phone. "Marian? Yes, two coffees please. Yes." He went to put the phone down, but then snatched it back up to his ear. "Marian, you still there? Marian? Yes, yes, it's still me. Hold all calls, will you—important meeting. No calls until I say. Understand?"

Rogers hung up, reached for his chair, and remembered that it wasn't there. He stood where he was, rubbing his hands together as if he was washing them. "Coffee won't be a minute, er, Detective."

"Fine," I said. "We'll wait until it's here before we start. No sense in being interrupted, and besides, you may not want any of your staff to be overhearing this particular conversation." Might as well crank the tension a little higher. I swiveled round in the chair, stared out of his big glass windows that overlooked the rest of the staff at their desks, gazing over Mr. Rogers's little empire. I hummed Puccini to myself as well, making it quite clear to him that we would not proceed until I chose to. I could hear him fidgeting behind me.

The door to the office opened, and I swiveled back to look into the room. A middle-aged woman in a bright floral print dress had brought two cups of coffee in on a tray, with a little milk jug and a bowl of sugar. And if I saw right, a small plate of biscuits. Very nice. She smiled nervously at me, but her attention was really on the chairs. Something unusual was obviously taking place in Mr. Rogers's room. He had noticed that the rearrangement of the furniture had caught her attention.

"On the desk, Marian, on the desk," Rogers snapped; and she hurried across, looking like a pet that was used to being kicked. Must be fun working for this man, I thought.

"Thank you—Marian, isn't it?" I said. "Thank you. And are those biscuits that I see?"

"Yes, there's bourbons, and there's custard creams."

"Marian, you're a treasure. How long have you worked here?"

I could see that Rogers was itching to get her out of there, but I shot him a warning look and he stood there, impotent.

"Eighteen years now." She knew straightaway without having to

count. "Eighteen years for the company, although not in this building; we only moved in here twelve years ago."

"A loyal servant." Time to ratchet the tension again. "And how long have you worked for Mr. Rogers?"

Rogers opened his mouth as if he were about to interrupt, then closed it again. He was jiggling one leg as if a wasp had just flown up his trousers.

"Eight years now." She knew that straightaway as well. Probably chalked every one of them off on the wall, like a prisoner in a gulag.

"You must know all the secrets here then, nothing'll get past you."

Marian laughed nervously, darting glances from Mr. Rogers back to me. Who is this man, I could see her thinking, what can I say that will not get me into trouble. I stood up, nodded to her, and got my coffee, wedging a custard cream into the saucer. "Thanks, Marian."

"Um yes, that will be all, Marian," Rogers said, attempting to reassert his authority. "Remember, hold all my calls. I've got no appointments this morning, have I?"

"There's Steven's appraisal, the work evaluation session you wanted—"

"Cancel them. Both of them."

"Yes, Mr. Rogers." She left the room, risking one last curious glance back at me. I sipped at my coffee and dipped my biscuit, not looking at Rogers.

"Right, shall we get on?" I said.

He came over, sat on the chair, muttered something and got up again, walking back over to his desk to get his coffee. When he sat back down again I would have bet that he wished he had not bothered, because when he rested his cup and saucer on his knee the crockery tinkled with the shaking of his leg. He took another sip to disguise his next action, and then with a too-studied casual gesture put the cup down on the floor, as if that was where he had always wanted to keep it.

"How can I help you, Detective?" His voice was full of bonhomie, the concern of a good citizen to help the forces of the law, full of earnest interest. The shake betrayed him though, an unconscious informant. I wondered what his secret really was. It wasn't sex, he didn't look the type and I think that Marian would rather have forced her head through the office shredder. Money. He was fiddling something, I could tell from the way that he started when I announced that I was Fraud, an involuntary backwards jerk of



the head, a licking of the lips, the way his eyes looked like those of a sheep at the slaughterhouse. Expenses maybe. Or overordering, some scam involving bogus invoices that ended up with payments for goods that were never received to a company that never existed. I had done my research, knew that this company had a reputation for slack accounting, had sat patiently in a pub while an obnoxious man drank the drinks that I bought him and sweated and broke wind and told me about all the dodges he had got up while he had worked there. And mentioned Mr. Rogers, a man who was most certainly up to something, even if no one really knew what.

"It's about counterfeit money, Mr. Rogers. Or to be more specific, the laundering of counterfeit money into the banking system. A very serious crime."

I sat back and watched the expressions chase each other over his face. Bewilderment. Confusion. Then hope, the prisoner finding out that the bars are loose, that the door has been left unlocked. I don't know what this is about, he was thinking, but maybe, just maybe it's nothing to do with me and I'm going to get away with whatever it is I am up to.

"I—I don't know anything about any counterfeit money."

"Mmm." I paused for a moment and just stared at him. "Do you not? Isn't it the case that you disperse a fair amount of money via these premises?"

"Well, it's not a huge amount, but some—but I—"

"Put a figure on it."

"Sorry?"

"In a week, how much?"

"Er, I don't know, I mean, without looking it up, six or seven thousand, it's not a lot these days, really—"

"Six or seven thousand pounds a week. Fifty weeks a year, say? That's three hundred and fifty thousand pounds a year. Three years, and there's over a million in cash passing through here. No, it's not a lot, Mr. Rogers, but that's how many counterfeiting operations work, drip-feeds so the banks won't notice it, using seemingly legitimate businesses to get the bent cash out there."

"No, but that's impossible, I mean—the money doesn't come from me, how could it, it comes in from head office."

"Does it indeed?" I sat forward in my seat, not hiding my excitement. "And does anyone in particular handle that side of things? In head office I mean."

"Er, yes, it's a Mr. Hassan," Rogers said, "that's who I deal with. Anwar Hassan."

"Anwar Hassan." I said the name slowly, in the way that you do when it is a name that you have said many times before.

"You already know about him?"

I said nothing, but let the silence speak for itself. I could see the spark in Rogers's eyes, the quick assumption, the prospect of an escape into daylight when only minutes before he had thought himself condemned to darkness.

"Of course you do," he said. His voice dropped to a level that was part conspiratorial, part overly friendly, wholly nauseating. "Always had my doubts about him. Of course, you know what it's like these days, can't say anything, especially with him being, you know."

"In head office?" I kept my voice completely neutral.

"No, no, I mean with him being, you know, foreign. I mean, he sounds English enough, heard him on the phone you'd never know he wasn't one of us, but still, it's a cultural thing, isn't it, trust, just not the same over there, is it?"

Revolting man, I thought. Time to put you back on the back foot, don't want you getting too confident.

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Rogers." My voice was full of contempt. "My wife is Egyptian."

"Uh—"

"Of course, you probably assumed that being with the police I'd be as free with casual offhand racism as you are, Mr. Rogers." He spluttered noises that never quite made it into words. "But it's not like that anymore in the force. And for some of us it never has been. So let's just move on, and I'll forget what you just said to me. Understood?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Don't. Don't try and apologize or explain it away because you will only make things worse, and frankly I don't have the patience. Now, back to Mr. Hassan. He mustn't get a whiff of the fact that we have him under investigation. If I hear that he has heard anything . . ."

Rogers virtually fell off his chair in his eagerness to agree with me, to reassure me that Hassan would hear nothing from him, not a word.

"Good. I think I can trust you in this." Rogers simpered a nervous smile back at me in response. "If the money dispersed through your office is counterfeit, then it would be a vital link in our chain of evidence."

Rogers looked thoughtful. At least, that's what I think it was; if I didn't have the experience of the last few minutes in his

company, then I'd have just thought that he was staring vacantly into space. I sat and waited, finishing my coffee.

"I don't see how it helps him," he said eventually. "I mean, I can see that it gets the counterfeit money out and into circulation, but where does Hassan—" He caught my look. "Where do the criminals get their money back?"

"Hallmark of a sophisticated counterfeiting laundry job," I said. "You keep the dispersal separate from the recouping operation. Diversify the dispersal routes and delink the income side of the operation as far as possible, get the proceeds back laundered through the accounting system, wrap it all up in transfers so complex that even the auditors miss them."

"Of course, of course, yes, I see."

"Or more likely, and much more simply, someone at head office just brings in a load of counterfeit cash in a sports bag and just swaps it for the legitimate money before it's couriered out to you all in the branches. Beautifully simple, if the opportunity is there, and no accounting audit will ever show it up. One minute's work, and clean money turns into dirty money as if by magic, and the clean money goes back to those in charge of the operation."

Rogers nodded. "Bloody clever."

"Bloody illegal. Have you any idea what effect counterfeiting has on the national economy? Serious destabilization of fiscal planning, Mr. Rogers. Serious. And that's why they pay me a decent amount of money to catch up with people—" I looked Rogers straight in the eye. "—who cheat their employers—" He blinked. "—and steal money—" He swallowed. "—fraud, all of it. But most of all, currency counterfeiting. That's my main interest these days."

"Yes, I can see why that's the worst," he said, desperate to drag the conversation away from the question of those who defraud their employers. "Sensible to concentrate efforts."

"If I can determine that the money you are dispersing—unknowingly—is counterfeit, then that puts us a huge step forward."

"Of course, anything we can do to help, anything."

"You have the money for this week? Here on the premises?"

"What? Yes. It was delivered yesterday. It'll only start going out tomorrow."

I smiled, and pulled the pen from my pocket. "Get me one note please, Mr. Rogers. Any one. Pick it at random." I waved the pen at him. "Let's find out if you're going to be able to help us make this vital link in the chain, and get me out of your hair. Any one, Mr. Rogers. Any one."

He scuttled out of the office. I leaned back and thought about

having another biscuit, decided not to. With luck I would be finished here soon, and could start thinking about lunch. Within a minute Rogers came back in, a twenty pound note in his hand. He waved it like a little girl waving her flag at the queen. I stood up, uncapped my pen. "On the desk please."

He swept some papers aside to make room, laid the note down on the desk. I walked up to it, squatted down and peered at it, stood up and looked down on it, tilted my head from side to side to look at it from every angle. "Good," I said. "Very good." I picked it up, holding the tiniest portion of one corner, held it up to the light. "Very, very good." I put it back down on the table again, readied my pen. Rogers crowded in close to me, and I could smell his sweat under his too-strong aftershave.

"What are we looking for?" he asked. I could feel the heat off him and wished that he would take a step back. I could make him jump if I wanted to, but now was not the time.

"Orange," I said. "If we see orange . . ."

"It's fake?"

"It's fake."

I held the note steady with one hand, and drew the pen right down the middle of it.

"It's fake," I said. There was a thick orange streak, cutting right across the picture of the queen.

"My God," Rogers said. "Is that—is it certain? It looks so real."

"It should look real, Mr. Rogers, this is the product of about as sophisticated a counterfeiting operation as you can get. But even they can't get the chemical composition of the surface of the note quite right, the Bank of England keeps that one as secret as anything gets in this country, and so these little pens are our greatest friends." I put the pen down on the table. "Would you mind if I tried . . . ?"

"No, no, not at all, I'll go straightaway."

He brought another five notes, and laid out each one on the desk for me to swipe with the pen, and with each one it was the same result.

"Cunning bastards," he said. "All this time, this money passing through my office. God, people might have thought I was behind it."

"Don't worry, Mr. Rogers," I said. "I don't know what else you might be up to—" I laughed as if I was joking. Maybe. He swallowed again and kept his face very still. "But I'm sure that you're just an innocent bystander in all of this, just being used. Still, with this batch as evidence, this whole thing is going to stop. A few

people at your head office will be getting a surprise visit in the next twenty-four hours. I'll need to take the whole batch off, of course, there's forensics to give it a going over first, pick up the characteristics of the printing plates, any fingerprints—someone will be out later on to take yours, just so we can eliminate them from the set, you and anyone else in this office who've handled the money, probably be some pretty WPC if you're lucky—then it's going to be part of the chain of evidence when we go to the Crown Prosecution Service to demonstrate a case—our accountancy team will be in touch with your head office, you won't lose out. Not a word though for twenty-four hours, not a word. If there are any leaks, the whole thing will be blown. Even if you think you can trust someone at head office, not a word. If you did—well, colleagues of mine would take some convincing that you weren't involved. They'd be in here going over all of your affairs with a fine-toothed comb. Of course, you'd have nothing to hide, but . . .”

Rogers was just about out the door. I let him go and waited. In about a minute, he came back in with the money, in marked courier bags from his company. I opened my briefcase and let him put it all inside. Then I closed the case, but did not spin the combinations.

“Are you completely mad, Mr. Rogers?”

The question caught him by surprise; he thought that it was all done, that it was over, that I was leaving.

“Sorry, I—I don't know—”

I held up the case. “You're letting me walk out of here with all this, and I haven't even given you a receipt. I'm not one of the policemen one year off retirement that they give crime prevention to, going round giving pensioners talks about window locks, but really Mr. Rogers, have some more sense.” I pulled the form from my pocket, set it on top of the case, began to fill it in. “BS47/1. Always ask for one of these in a case like this. Always, always. And make sure the officer signs it and puts their number on. See—like this. If you can't read the name—it should be printed, not a signature—or the number, then tell them you won't accept it and ask them for another one. There, you sign, here, and here, where I've put the crosses. No, you can just sign it, no need to print, you know who you are. There, done. Now this is your copy, and I suggest that you put it straight back into that safe. And this is my copy, which goes on the case file—if we go as far as proceeding with the case, and with what you're telling me hopefully we won't get that far. And this one—” I opened the briefcase and dropped it

in, snapped the locks shut, spun the combinations this time. “—this one stays with the exhibit at all times. Chain of evidence, Mr. Rogers, sure you’ve heard of it.”

He nodded, although I expect if I asked him to repeat any of what I had just said he would just have given me a blank and confused look. I confused him again, by sticking my hand out at him. He stared at it for a moment, and then realized what I was doing. His hand felt so sweaty that it was all that I could do to resist wiping it on my trousers the moment that he let go.

“Well, thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Rogers. If what you say is true, then all this will be over in a day or so and we’ll owe you an apology. Hope you understand why we have to be vigilant—daresay you wouldn’t be too happy if one of your customers paid you in counterfeit currency.”

“No,” he said, “no, I—I understand.”

Oh no you don’t, I thought. I nodded at him, picked up my orange marker pen, and left, walking briskly out of his office, leaving him standing alone and confused, a man whose world had been turned upside down in the space of a morning. I smiled at Marian as I walked out through the main office toward the lifts. It had been good coffee, and she had given us biscuits, too. Rogers would feel confused for a few minutes, then relieved that whatever it was that he was up to, whatever it was that he was hiding, had nothing to do with the reason why I was there. That relief might last a few hours before he started thinking straight, depending on how guilty he really was. Then he might start getting suspicious, dismiss it as paranoia, then really think about it, maybe make a few phone calls, and then he would be ringing the real police. But I would be long gone by then, me and this briefcase. 🐦

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# ABSOLUTELY LIVE IN PERSON

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ROBERT S. LEVINSON

“**L**ook,” Mickey Barnum was saying, “I didn’t drag myself to LAX and red-eye three thousand miles to take *no* for an answer.” He slapped his palms on Coopersmith’s desk for emphasis and gave him one of his patented hard-stare smiles.

The lawyer let Mickey see he was unimpressed.

Mickey knew the look.

He’d seen it a million times, give or take, on every Forbes Coopersmith of the business, straight-arrow suits who liked to call a strike even before the pitch, as if that would be enough to intimidate Mickey and make him ratchet up his offer a notch or three.

Coopersmith leaned forward, settled his elbows on the sleek surface of a walnut desk that held no evidence of work, and made a finger pyramid.

“A hundred grand more up front and I might be interested,” he said, like he was shutting the door on any options, except—

He had a lazy left eye.

It was twitching now.

The twitch, all Mickey needed to see to figure the lawyer was running a Park Avenue bluff.

Mickey moved his hands out of sight and pushed hard on his thighs to steady his legs before the sound of his elevator heels on the parquet floor rose to ear level and revealed the flaw in his nerves of steel. For as many times as he’d been through one of these negotiating confrontations, he had never quite mastered anything beyond a poker face.

“Terrific, except it’s not *you* I want, Mr. Coopersmith. I want your client. I want to bring Diana Demarest back to life and give her fans throughout the world an opportunity to relive the magic moments they spent with her over all those decades in darkened movie palaces.”



"Mickey, perhaps you didn't hear me when I said you aren't the first promoter—"

"Entrepreneur. I do other things. Also quite well."

"—You aren't the first . . . entrepreneur to come at me with this type of proposal."

"But I am the only Mickey Barnum, Mr. Coopersmith, the man who created *Absolutely Live in Person*."

"Ab-solutely Live in Person," the lawyer repeated, putting top spin on the word *Live*. "Even with the now-deceased stars of earlier years, the Diana Demarests who've become as close as any to the iconic stature of a Harlow, a Garbo. Monroe. Duke Wayne. Chaplin and Pickford before them. Quite the miracle worker you are."

Mickey chose to overlook the lawyer's sarcasm. He gave a modest shrug, anchored an acknowledging grin on his face, and ran an invisible chalk mark in the air.

"I'm also the biggest, the best, the most successful. I have put life back into the bank accounts of their heirs. And their lawyers." He let the remark sink in. "Mr. Coopersmith, I have never run a losing tour and that's because I've never run into anyone who knows more about show business history than me. A walking encyclopedia. I know what the public's hungry for and I know how to feed that hunger."

"I admire your modesty, Mickey. Let's settle on another seventy-grand to sweeten the pot and push forward. How's that sit with you?" His left eye doing its little dance again, but something in the lawyer's manner that was stronger than a simple bluff.

Mickey drew some comfort from his belief that the offer he'd put on the plate twenty minutes ago represented more bread than Coopersmith and the Demarest estate had seen in the twenty years since Diana had vanished.

Poof.

She'd been there one minute, gone the next, on the day she shot her last scene for what nobody suspected at the time would be her last movie for United Artists, for anyone—*Street Corner Sinners*, back in the early eighties.

She was never heard from again.

After seven years, she was declared legally dead, but—

Mickey hadn't just drawn Diana Demarest's name out of the hat and made her next in line for the *Absolutely Live in Person* treatment. He'd actually been thinking about a show that paired Lemmon and Matthau, "One More Night with The Odd Couple," but—

He'd fallen into proof Diana Demarest might still be alive.

Even dead she would provide good value, only slower, over the

long haul, especially if he could score the London Palladium for two nights, but—

*Alive?* Diana Demarest back among the living?

That's what had gotten the adrenaline pumping and made him hop the American to JFK and round one of this gamesmanship with Forbes Coopersmith, Esq.

Mickey was certain finding Diana Demarest could mean the biggest payday of his career.

She would be his General Tom Thumb, his Jenny Lind, "The Swedish Nightingale," his Jumbo the Elephant—the same kind of international attraction that had helped make his great-great-grandfather, the great, the one-and-only Phineas T., rich and famous and an icon in his own right.

It was the rich that interested Mickey most. For all the success of *Absolutely Live in Person* and his other shows, his ultra-expansive lifestyle routinely kept him teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Not that he didn't enjoy being there.

Living on the edge was his drug of choice. It helped him to keep his engine recharged, as it had his father, his grandfather, and all the other family members who had devoured challenge as soul food.

They'd managed to survive, better than survive, come out on top, live happily ever after. Most of them, anyway, so he wasn't going to be the one who defied Barnum tradition by conforming to the Average Joe Code of Conduct: a job and a weekly paycheck, a mortgage, a ten-year-old car in desperate need of brakes, braces for the kids. Clipping discount coupons and shopping at BuyCheap U.S.A.

Truth be told, he admired the people who lived that way and sometimes wished he could be one of them. He had even tried it once or twice when he was younger, but he had failed. The failure had pushed him back on a course that dictated a million-dollar bankroll before the age of thirty-five.

He had accomplished that.

He had scored it by the age of twenty-five—nine, almost ten years ago—and he'd lost most of it by the age of twenty-six. On and off the Golden Chariot.

Damn, what a rush.

And here he was making another charge.

Mickey could feel the invisible sweat washing his scalp and the roots of his thick, curly, coal black hair, collecting in his armpits, beading in the deep trenches of his broad forehead. In show business they called it "flop sweat."

If Forbes Coopersmith noticed, he wasn't saying, but maybe that's what made him rear back in his cushy executive chair, fold his legs, lock his fingers on his lap, and tell the space between them, "Truth is, you don't have seventy-fiveGs to pull me in, much less a hundred thou, isn't that so, Mickey?"

"What's so, counselor, is that my offer of five thousand up front is what *good faith* is worth to me in this situation. Any dollars after that go into development, getting a Diana Demarest *Absolutely Live in Person* up and running and on the road."

"I thought not," Coopersmith said, as if he had answered the question. He removed his wire-rimmed frames, steam cleaned the lenses with his breath, and dried them with the patterned silk handkerchief he pulled from his shapeless Armani jacket. "Why don't you come around and test your luck next time you have a hundred thousand to go with your five thousand up front. Then, we can talk about it again, though I can't promise it won't be more the next time, inflation being what it is."

"You said plus-seventy-five would make the deal today."

Coopersmith shrugged and flashed an insincere smile.

"The clock ran out on seventy-five, Mickey."

"So, a hundred thousand and we would have a deal? Exclusive rights to a tour and all that goes with it. A souvenir program, posters, calendars, a book, maybe even a movie, and—"

"You're dreaming pretty large, but why not? Yes. A hundred and five out the door, but I fear it's only you heading for the door right now."

Coopersmith started to rise, but Mickey pushed out his palm like a traffic cop.

"Not necessarily," Mickey said. "A hundred-five and we can shake on it?"

Coopersmith challenged him with a puzzled look, but after a second added a discreet nod.

Mickey leaned down to retrieve his travel-pocked attaché case, its lid lost under destination stickers of various sizes, shapes, and countries. Settled it on the desk. Snapped open the lid and extracted a large manila envelope. From it he removed a series of smaller envelopes, checking notations until he found the two he wanted and offered them to the lawyer. He closed the case and returned it to the floor while Coopersmith checked them both for contents.

One envelope held five thousand-dollar bills.

The other contained a certified check made out to cash in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars.

Coopersmith blew out enough air to sail the QE2 across the Atlantic.

He decided finally, "I must say I'm surprised beyond words, Mickey."

"What I'd like to hear you say, Mr. Coopersmith, is the one word: *deal*. Exclusive rights across the board, overseas as well as here in the States."

Coopersmith stretched his hand over the desk, smiled for real this time, and said, "Call me Smitty."

Mickey waited until he was back at his suite at the Plaza to phone his father in Los Angeles. Murray Barnum layered some asthmatic breath in the air and said, "So we only had to go the hundred G on top of the five?"

"Right, Pop. He was a total goner on the yarn you fed him about me dangling from the crest of Mount Disaster by my short hairs. Otherwise, he and I would probably still be doing battle somewhere north of five hundred thou. When he saw the bills and the certified check, he didn't pause to consider how much might be in the other envelopes. We had him."

Murray chuckled for both of them and fell into a reprise of the call he'd made yesterday to Coopersmith, dropping his voice an octave and assuming an accent from a country existing solely in his imagination:

*"Stars on Stage, my company, is ready to spare no expense to bring a show about our beloved Diana Demarest to the stage, sir. Fifty thousand is all we ever offer to secure the rights, not a penny more, or we have problems with favored nations. But at least you know you will be paid, unlike promises you get from our piddling competition, Mr. Mickey Barnum, who is so broke not even all the king's horses and all the king's men could ever put him together . . ."*

Turning serious again, Murray said, "You think her heirs, Diana Demarest's, will ever see any of that hundred thou?"

"Pop, that's between Coopersmith and his ethics. Lets hope we're on a flight path to landing Diana Demarest alive. The headlines. The box office. The whole shooting match." Mickey shook his head in disbelief.

"You get any sense of it from him?"

"Every reference was in the past tense, Pop. The starting point will have to be with her sister after I get back to L.A. He's arranging for me to meet with her."

"She has a sister living here?"

"An address over in the Atwater district."

"Atwater, huh?" Murray Barnum grunted. "If I'd've known a neighborhood like that, I'd have urged you to cap the game at twenty-five. Maybe even the original five."

Mickey said, "If it turns out Diana's been alive all these years, we'll make back our hundred on the sale of her story to one of the tabloids. The how and why of her disappearance. Not quite the same as discovering a living, breathing Elvis, but—"

"It turns out Diana Demarest is still dead?" Murray said, over-riding his son, his voice begging the question.

"Then, Pop, we'll still have the question of how she came to sign an autograph from the grave. Unless you want to change your mind and decide what you saw was a forgery."

"Whatever else it was, Mickey, it was no forgery."

If anyone knew, Murray Barnum knew.

That, Mickey Barnum knew.

**M**urray owned the M. Berman Gallery of Greatness, a modest shop on Little Santa Monica Boulevard in Beverly Hills, within walking distance of the Friars Club, where he specialized in the purchase and sale of celebrity autographs. His business grew out of the hobby he'd pursued since boyhood and over the years he'd come to be acknowledged as the matchless dean of authentication.

He was a grand master of the Collectors Society of America, having won the CSA's highest honor, the "Siggy" (for Signature) more times than any other ranking authority, and of course, he was the first member to be voted into the CSA Hall of Fame.

He'd recognized the Diana Demarest signature for what it was—authentic—the instant he laid eyes on it, about half an hour after he'd bought the old autograph book from a guy who'd waltzed in off the street with a story Murray had heard almost word-for-word thousands of times over the years: He was the relative delegated by the family to unload the mementos of a life recently abandoned by a dearly beloved. In this case, a favorite aunt. The book was the kind school kids have used forever come graduation time, only the couple dozen pages inside the maroon pages here were covered front and back with the signatures of movie and TV stars from the late seventies and early eighties, most of them recognizable, but only a few major names sprinkled among them—a Peck here, a Nicholson there; Stanwyck; the Fondas, father and daughter; Jack Lemmon; Bob Hope.

"Worth a few bucks?" the man asked, in a voice that said he had been through the process a lot with other of Favorite Aunt's

keepsakes and was anxious for it to be over. Murray figured him for mid-to-late forties, a handsome, silver-haired gent with a perfect nose; expensive tailored suit cut to his six, six-one; sleepy eyes half-hidden behind lemon yellow shades. Bouncing nervously from one tasseled loafer to the other while waiting out an answer.

When it came to autographs, Murray never played games with the truth.

"Hard to say," he said.

"For you? I heard you were the best. Why I came here. What makes it hard to say, or is that a trade secret?" A belligerent edge to the question.

Murray never minded the chance to show off, so he answered with a few of the basics.

"For one, a signature page is always worth more when it's signed on one side only," he said. "Look here where I'm showing you, you'll see why. Where some of the ink bleeds through?"

"Yeah, yeah. Yes. How much then?"

"For another, from my fast check, all of these were what we in the business call 'easy gets,' stars who'd sign whenever they got asked. That sends the value way down, given there's nothing rare about their signatures."

"Down puts it where? Do you have a number?"

"I did spot an exception to the rule, sir. The Duke. John Wayne. You get into his rarified air, a genuine icon that one, and serious collectors never seem to care how many Duke Waynes are out there or their condition."

"Okay, I was steered right. You know your stuff. How much for the book?"

"Maybe your aunt also got a Brando in there, or maybe a Cary Grant? Both of them hard gets, so that would push the total value up quite handsomely. You have a little time, I'm glad to make a careful study and offer an appraisal you could take to the bank on my signature."

The gent pushed back his right jacket sleeve and checked the time, the watch a bold tribute to eighteen karat gold. His head jiggled left and right.

Murray said, "Let me keep your autograph book overnight and come back tomorrow. I'll make out a receipt for it."

"I'll be gone tomorrow. What are you hoping? That I pay you to take the book off my hands? Look, give me a ballpark figure I can live with or the name of your nearest competitor."

Murray looked at him like he was crazy. "Competitor? Tell me you're kidding. You must be kidding. You heard about me, then

you know I'm head and shoulders—" He picked up the book, toyed with it for about thirty seconds. "Eight hundred tops, based on what I saw so far, and mostly because of the Duke."

"Fine. Done."

"I might have gone higher, except the Duke's in pencil and that weighs down the value to a serious collector. Ink's always what most serious collectors prefer, except where it's obviously not possible, because—"

"I said done. Deal. The eight hundred is fine."

Murray closed the autograph book and gave the cover a few love pats. "Swell, then. I'll make you out a check."

"I'd rather have cash."

Murray turned a palm to the chipped and peeling ceiling paint and made a Why Not? face.

Between the cash drawer and his billfold, all he could come up with was six hundred fifty. He said as much to the gent and offered to give him a voucher for the difference, suggesting, "You leave me your address, I'll go to the bank first thing later and put it in the mail to you."

"Six hundred fifty will do fine, Mr. Berman."

He snatched the bills away from Murray and hurried out like he was one step ahead of the hounds from hell. Too late, Murray realized he had no bill of sale, no way to prove he'd purchased the lot, were the gent ever to come back demanding return of the autograph book, claiming it was stolen property; not a scenario unknown to the trade. Not the first time Murray had erred on the side of enthusiasm.

He brewed himself a fresh cup of tea and settled down into a careful page-by-page study of the book, armed with the trusty magnifying glass he used to help spot any flaws invisible to the naked eye that might impact the value of a signature for better or for worse.

Nothing especially unexpected he'd skipped over and missed before. The usual suspects. More than a few names he knew from the soaps, but couldn't put a face to. A young Linda Blair from *The Exorcist*, who was on the autograph circuit nowadays. A nice Sylvia Sidney, the penmanship as revealing of her age as all the wrinkles she'd accumulated late in life. A hasty John Houseman, who had gone from winning an Oscar for *The Paper Chase* to the TV series based on the movie to those TV commercials for—Murray couldn't remember what.

It would have been wonderful to stumble into the signature of Houseman's old partner from the Mercury Theater days, Orson



Welles, as well. Welles, always someone ripe to pay a premium for the great man. But finding Houseman and Welles together was as likely as falling into a Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis on the same sheet of paper.

Murray clucked at his good fortune when he came upon the bold and elegant signature of Diana Demarest, her penmanship grade-school impeccable, filling almost all the page, in the vibrant red ink that had become a Diana Demarest trademark.

If he had seen it before he'd quoted the gent a price, he would have had to go up by at least a thousand. Fifteen hundred. Maybe another two thousand over the eight hundred he first quoted. The six-five-oh he wound up paying a bigger bargain now than anything at the local Save-Mart.

Diana was always a hot catch, but never more so than after her disappearance, again when she was officially declared dead seven years later. Her autograph became a rarity, rarely found on the open market, and coveted by collectors around the globe. He had clients who'd fall over themselves to own it.

He began to fantasize about the bidding war he could start if he chose to go that route, instead of putting the signature in the safe deposit box along with others of rising value that he was saving for retirement and a Malibu condo with a view.

Murray put the glass to the signature, adjusting position until it came into perfect focus, moving the rectangular lens left and right and back again, then dancing it around the page.

Letter perfect and no question about its authenticity, but there was something . . .

What's it, Murray? he asked himself. What do you see that's not to your liking, that's not right? What's the bother putting a question mark on your mind?

He set the book aside to ponder the question over his tea. It had grown cold. He was halfway to giving it a warm-up shot in the microwave when the answer came to him.

Murray charged back to the desk and checked the autograph book. Yes! There it was, what was bothering him.

He reached for the phone and autodialed his son.

"Yeah, Pop, what's up?"

Murray quickly explained, his heart pounding excitement so loud, like a Gene Krupa or Buddy Rich was beating on the sticks, that he had trouble hearing his own voice.

When he finished, Mickey said, "Fine, Pop. Now slow down and say it so I can understand you. You're telling me that the autograph is genuine, right?"

"Right. I'd swear it on your dear mother's gravestone."

"And what else?"

"Genuine, but wrong."

"Wrong because?"

"Diana signed with the lower case *d* on both names. That's how she signed her autograph when she was just starting out and unsure of herself, the same as Greer Garson did. Later, when she became the giant star she became, she did it the right way, with two capital *Ds*, like Greer Garson did when she became big."

"What I'm hearing is that the collector got her when Diana was just starting out . . . So what, Pop?"

"That's the half of it, Mickey. Whoever's autograph book this was, that person wrote the date it was begun on the inside front cover. The date the last autograph was collected is on the inside back cover."

Murray recited the dates.

"Diana Demarest was already the big star by then."

Mickey played them back at him and, after a brief silence, said, "She also was already among the missing by then."

"And that's the other half," Murray said. "Diana Demarest was not only missing by then, but she'd been legally declared dead."

Mickey told him, "Sit tight, Pop. I'm on my way over there soon as I finish up with this call from London I've had hanging on the other line."

The day after returning to Los Angeles, Mickey headed for the meeting Coopersmith had set for him with Diana Demarest's sister.

Atwater was a neighborhood in transition between the east edge of Los Feliz and the onset of Glendale, close to Echo Park, but not part of anyplace in particular. It was the "bargain basement" of the real estate market, filled with rows of small homes on tiny lots, in various styles of architecture reflecting their decade of construction, and existing in harmony along soldierly lines of neatly kept front lawns of brown grass and FOR SALE signs.

Alice Buckingham's house was from the gingerbread school of design, cute and quaint inside a white picket fence, the slanted roof in need of some new shingles to replace the ones blown away by recent windstorms, the woodwork also showing evidence of wind damage, but overall a credit to the neighborhood.

She was at the front door within a minute of Mickey ringing the bell, an expectant look on her attractive face, his name on her exotic lips, a sensual glimmer in her translucent blue eyes that

he'd never before observed in a woman of her age, which he figured to be about fifty. She was buried inside a bulky terry cloth robe, her hair hidden under a towel the same pink shade.

The robe slipped apart when she pushed open the screen door and welcomed him inside, pointing him to the living room, where she had freshly brewed coffee and home-baked brownies set out in anticipation of his visit.

Mickey averted his eyes at the flash of tight pink flesh, but not fast enough for her to miss noticing. She blushed, but otherwise said nothing. She struck a provocative pose settling in the easy chair across from his spot on the sofa. She unwrapped the towel and dropped it on the worn carpeting, shook loose the freed bushel of snow white hair and groomed it with a few head tosses and her long, lean fingers.

"Smitty called and told me what you're planning about my late sister," Alice said, "this *Absolutely Alive* tour you just paid me so much money for to acquire the rights." Her tone was tinged in amazement, while her voice conjured up mind pictures of sailing vessels being drawn to the rocks by a siren's call. "Frankly, I'm surprised Diana, big a star as she was, is still worth so much after so many years, but no argument from me, Mr. Barnum. Frankly, I am not financially well off of late and can use your generous advance to pay off a ton of debts."

"A lot more where that came from, Mrs. Buckingham."

"Miss. Always the bridesmaid, that's me. If anything, I've made a successful transition from bridesmaid to old maid." She unleashed a laugh and her expression welcomed Mickey to join in.

Mickey smiled and sipped at his coffee. "I'm surprised," he said, "given how—" And stopped short of finishing the thought.

Alice Buckingham finished it for him. "How well preserved I appear to be? Well, I am that, Mickey, if I may be so bold. And I'm Alice."

"Be so bold, Alice."

"Frankly, I've never been one to stand on formality. I have always taken care of my body. Clean mind. Clean body. Take your pick." A pixie laugh. "Who said that? Not that it matters. It's a philosophy I seem to have acquired quite naturally, ages upon ages ago."

Alice sent over a devilish grin, started patting her robe in search of something, her hands momentarily fixating on her breasts before they slid down into the pockets and withdrew an old-fashioned cigarette case with a burnished gold finish, the size of a CD, and a matching slimline lighter.

She extracted a cork filter tip from the case and fitted it to her

mouth like a straw, powered up the lighter, and swallowed enough smoke to power her lungs for a week while sliding into a half-reclining position. A section of robe retreated as her legs stretched and crossed at the ankles, exposing enough perfectly formed calf and thigh to inspire the next revolution.

She seemed to make sure he'd noticed, then covered up, this time without a blush. She then held up the cigarette like Exhibit A and said, "Some habits are filthier than others. The best ones are the ones hardest to break." Her leer made him doubt she was talking about her smoking. "Do you indulge, Mickey?" That laugh again. "In cigarettes, I mean."

Not trusting his voice, he glided his face left and right.

Alice pushed out her lips and gave him some Morse code with her eyes, said, "No smoking, but I'd bet you still steam a lot," before she let the innuendos lapse into history.

He cleared his throat, took a monumental gulp of coffee, and got her back talking about her sister and the *Absolutely Live in Person* project.

Alice let him see she recognized the maneuver. She twisted her mouth into an awkward pout, pounded out the cigarette, and moved back into an upright position, her arms locked across her waist.

"Where shall we begin, Mickey?"

He explained what had worked successfully for the others he'd built shows around, the career keepsakes too personal to toss that get relegated to filing cabinets and storage garages, which take on a golden afterlife when offered on the altar of fan memory and adoration.

"You'd be amazed," he said. "The audience will always go nuts when something as simple, as basic, as a dress Milton Berle wore gets rolled out. Sunset Beaudry's ten-gallon hat. A sword Kirk Douglas wielded in *Spartacus*, or Chuck Heston in *Ben Hur*. Judy's ruby red slippers. But most of all, it's the old footage. A reel of a dozen highlight scenes from the best of the movies. Maybe some home movie footage, full of backstage glimpses the fans only knew from magazines and newspapers, the tabloids. When it's over, everybody leaves the theater glowing, thinking the show was worth twice the ticket price."

She signaled understanding and began counting off on her fingers what she knew to exist, in the basement and the attic, but mostly in the rental storage compound about a mile away. All the while, her wondrous eyes fixed on a corner of the ceiling, as if that was where she had filed the inventory on her sister's possessions.

They turned back on Mickey when she was through, smiling

triumphantly, complimenting herself on her memory, wondering, "Will that be enough for your program? I think so, don't you?"

He picked this as a good time to drop the bomb on her. "How about Diana?" he said. "Having Diana step out at some perfectly timed moment from behind the curtain would make this a definite smash at the box office, keep both of you debt free for years to come."

Alice ceased looking like she'd just finished first in the swimsuit competition. She bolted upright and dug into him with a stare as sharp as a stiletto, then closed her eyes, as if there were something working behind them that she did not want Mickey to see, and blindly grabbed after a fresh cigarette.

She wandered the room for a few moments, then stepped back until she hovered over him, legs spread wide, one arm across her midsection, the hand supporting the elbow of her cigarette hand. The smoke filtering like dragon's breath from the corners of her mouth.

"What exactly was that supposed to mean, Mickey? Is there something you think you know that you haven't been sharing with me?" Her words popping like acorns in a fireplace, challenging, but also trying not to make her sound threatened by whatever his answers might be.

"I'm sharing with you now, Alice."

"You make it sound like you think my sister's still alive."

"Is she?"

Alice made an unintelligible noise of disbelief.

"Next, Mickey, you'll be accusing me of being Diana."

"Are you?"

He flicked the corners of his mouth and held her eyes for study. They were as flat as the world before Columbus. She took another drag and papered him with the bluish stream, spun around and moved quickly to the fireplace.

The mantel was decorated with photos of Diana Demarest at various stages of her career, the frames growing more elaborate and ornate with the success visible in her poses and costuming. Serving as bookends were the Oscar she'd won for *Paris Holiday*, the Emmy for her indelible Laura in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, opposite Jack Lemmon's Gentleman Caller.

The centerpiece, above Diana's portrait by Warhol, was a blue crystal vase.

Alice made a sweeping gesture of introduction and said, "You're looking for Diana, here she is," then addressing the vase, "Sis, I believe Mickey would like a word with you."

She froze her stare on him and, as the room temperature dropped to a level only penguins could love, said, "Go for it, Mickey."

Mickey finished the cookie he was munching, washed it down with a coffee mouth rinse, unwound from the couch, and headed to the mantel.

Alice stepped aside.

He leaned over and said quietly, as if he were dealing confidentially with the crystal vase, "Let me explain, Diana, assuming you don't mind if Alice tunes in on us." He gave the vase a minute to answer before advising, "Your sis apparently doesn't mind, Al."

It took only two or three minutes to share the story with Diana, about the man who'd sold the autograph book to Pop, how Pop had reacted upon discovering the Diana Demarest signature, and his subsequent realization about the double Ds in relation to the time frame.

"What got me to New York and your lawyer, Diana, the idea that you might still be alive. But it's okay, you like this—as nice a vase as any gown Edith Head ever put you in. You're sure to get heavy applause from all your fans when Sis here escorts you onto the stage."

Mickey glanced over his shoulder at Alice.

"We get the personal touch from you, Al. The family thing never fails to work its magic. We script it right, you'll have them drowning in tears when you explain how Diana, your loving sister—"

Alice signaled Mickey to stop with a wild arm motion. She insisted, "That person, the man who took the autograph book to your father's shop. Can you describe him to me?"

He shared what he knew, not a lot, but enough to drain the color from her face, turn it pasty white, and inflate her eyes with sudden fear, like some startled Bambi confronting the headlights of an oncoming truck.

"I should have known it was too good to last," Alice said. "That miserable—" She realized she was doing more than thinking the thoughts to herself and quit. She seemed to withdraw for several seconds into her memory before declaring, "It's over, Mickey. No tour, no anything. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Thank you, but no. I'll call him, Smitty, to tell him I won't go forward with this and to send you back your money. Every penny. Thank you, Mickey. Now, go. Please leave. I need you to go."

Instead, Mickey moved back to the couch and landed with a resolve that said he had no intention of leaving. "Not so fast or so easy, Al. Spill it. I want the story on this guy and what it is freaking you out."

Alice crisscrossed the room, unable to settle down anywhere until, out of frustration, she picked a director's chair next to the hallway, Diana Demarest's name silk-screened in white block letters on the black leather backing.

"His name's McCracken," she said, her voice breaking on his name. "Murphy McCracken. I thought I'd lost him years ago, that he had quit hunting me in the hopes I'd lead him to Diana."

"A stalker."

"A nut case. Letters. Phone calls all hours of the day and night. Everywhere I turned until, finally, I managed to sneak out of New York. That was three years ago, three years after he first started coming around."

"You never called the cops? Got a restraining order against this yutz?"

"Both. You see how much good—" Her voice sank into tears. She buried her face in her hands. "You have to go and I have to get moving again," she said.

Before Mickey could tell her he had no intention of leaving without the answer he'd come for, somebody else was saying, "Too late this time. I'm here already."

Mickey edged around to see they were being confronted by a man who fit Pop's description of the gent who had sold him the autograph book, from his yellow-tinted shades to the tassels on his glistening loafers.

"The front door was unlocked, so I didn't bother to knock," he said, a smile in his voice, like a next-door neighbor who had dropped by to borrow two eggs. "It's good to see you again. It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Never wouldn't be long enough, you dreadful, distasteful excuse for a human being," she said, spitting the words at him.

He smiled as if he had just been knighted by the queen and said, "I'm fine," then to Mickey, "I'm Murphy McCracken, by the way, Mr. Barnum, but my friends call me Murf. Thank you so very much for making this occasion possible."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mickey said, Alice asking the same question with an angry look.

"Just when I thought I'd never find her again—" He pointed at Alice. "The answer came to me at one of your *Absolutely Live in Person* shows. The ones back in June, the Starlight Theater in Philly honoring—"

"Laura Dane. Six nights, all SRO."

"Right," Murf said, tapping his nose. "I was there for all the shows. Laura Dane is my second favorite actress of all time, right



behind Diana. A real hummer she is. You know, Laura once tried to get me into the sack? Nothing Laura said, but I could tell by the way she cast her eyes on me. Undressing me. Made me break out into a real sweat." He rolled his eyes. "I was showing her how well I could sign her signature, and that's when it came to me, the idea, because I can do Diana's signature even better, so letter perfect after doing it all these years that nobody has ever spotted it for a forgery. It's how I make any extra dollars I sometimes need, like for those Laura Dane tickets or this trip to L.A."

"The autograph in the book you sold to my father—"

McCracken tapped his nose, then his temple. "My handiwork. The solution I hatched for finding Diana. I remembered reading once in *Autograph Monthly* how nothing can ever get by the great Murray Barnum. How you were his son. Get Murray Barnum involved could get you involved, I figured. With a little luck, get you interested in doing one of your *Absolutely Lives* for Diana. How that could open a new trail right up to the doorstep of—"

He smiled and bobbed his head at Alice, who responded with a venomous sound.

"I'm always picking up old autograph books at the collector shows and conventions. I put a Diana Demarest in one of them and took it to your father. To be certain it got Murray's attention, hopefully get him to mention it to you—"

"You put the Ds of her name at odds with the dates in the autograph book."

"Right as rain, and then I just staked out a place to wait and I waited. Once you showed up, I knew my plan was cooking. I stayed on your trail and, well, here we are, sir, where I have wanted and prayed to be for years." He swung his palms out and over like he was getting ready to catch rain. "In the presence of the fabulous, magnificent lady herself, Miss Diana Demarest. Are you ready to admit it to me yet, Miss Demarest? So I'll be able to share the wonderful news with all your legions of fans throughout the world that you're still alive?"

Alice looked at him with mounting distaste. "You nut case. You need to be put away for good, once and for all. Under lock and key and never let out. Leave now or I'm calling the police."

"You would not do that. Not after I've waited, worshipped, and prayed for all these years."

Alice stepped over to the phone.

His head rattling left and right, a guttural denial raging from his throat, his joy collapsing, McCracken circumvented the sofa and rushed toward her.

Mickey leaped up and blocked his way. McCracken tried to push him aside, but Mickey wrapped him in a lover's tight embrace, strapping McCracken's arms to his side. From somewhere, McCracken summoned an abnormal burst of power. He broke loose, pushed Mickey to the floor, and fell on top of him. He worked into a sitting position and began pummeling Mickey on his chest and about the face.

Mickey felt his left cheek snap under one blow, his nose on the next one. He felt the flow of warm blood from both nostrils racing down the side of his neck. He vaguely saw Alice reaching after something. A moment later, as darkness began to cloud his consciousness, he heard Alice bring the blue crystal vase down on Murphy McCracken's head. As black ashes watered McCracken's silver hair and flowed down his face, Mickey heard a whimper of despair, and then he heard nothing at all.

Thirty-six hours after his encounter with Murphy McCracken, Mickey roused from his drug-supported sleep in a private room at Cedars-Sinai, Pop at his bedside, assuring him, "The doctors told me you'll live, but getting that busted-up puss of yours back to beautiful will take time. I told them, 'Beautiful? I always knew this was a great hospital, but I didn't know that you performed miracles.'"

Mickey tried laughing, but it hurt too much.

He wondered, "McCracken?" hardly able to pronounce the name past the bandages mummifying half his face.

"Unfortunately, Diana Demarest only hit him hard enough to bust his skull a little, so he'll live, too. He's being charged with aggravated assault. It could have been manslaughter in the first degree, except for Wonder Woman here."

Mickey worked his chin up and saw her peering back at him from behind Pop's chair, an air of relief playing on her face. He worked his jaw a little to loosen the bandages and make his voice more than a mumble.

"So, I was right. And so was McCracken. You are Diana."

"No, sorry, Mickey, I'm not. When your father said Diana hit McCracken, he meant the vase containing my sister's ashes. I'm still Alice, and this—" She held up an envelope for him to see and turned it over to Murray. "—this is your authorization to take whatever you want from my storage garage and from the house for our *Absolutely Live* tribute to Sis."

She noticed the question mark in eyes Mickey could barely keep open. Explained, "I'm heading for New York tonight on the red-eye

to take care of estate business my lawyer called to say he urgently needs me for. It may take a while, Smitty said, but I'll be in touch."

"Be in the show?"

"Maybe. We'll talk." She moved around and leaned over him, kissed his forehead. Murray rose and held out his hand to her. Instead of taking it, she answered him with a hug, then hurried from the room, pausing for a backward glance and a goodbye wave before she disappeared.

Murray watched her leave, then he settled into the chair again and said, "So let's double-check what we have ourselves here."

He pulled a single sheet of elegant but inexpensive powder blue stationery from the envelope. The letter of authorization had been handwritten in black ballpoint, a flowing hand, every word letter-precise. Murray moved his lips while reciting the words under his breath. He got about halfway through before falling silent. He held out the sheet for Mickey to see and said, "Take a good look for yourself."

Mickey struggled to fix focus, asking, "Is something wrong, Pop?"

"Authorization signed by Alice Buckingham, as clear as can be to let you go about our business, but the handwriting, that's something else again. Her handwriting was always as distinctive as her signature, any time I saw it, so I'm ready to swear it on your dear mother's gravestone that we just said goodbye to Diana Demarest."

Mickey was discharged from Cedars-Sinai the next morning. Murray drove them to the house in Atwater.

There was a FOR LEASE sign posted on the parkway lawn. No evidence inside of its most recent occupant.

The next stop was the storage garage.

There was no space with the numbers indicated in the letter of authorization. No record of any space ever having been rented to anyone named Alice Buckingham.

Forbes Coopersmith took Mickey's call on what was either the seventh or eighth try. He was cordial and polite while advising him, "My client's changed her mind about your show. Your advance in full will be in the mail to you by the end of the week."

For months afterward, Mickey startled himself awake in the middle of the night, always trying to hold on to his recurring dream about Diana Demarest, believing the dream held the key to her disappearance, but the dream always evaporated—

As Diana Demarest had. 🐦

# THE ROAD TO MEMPHIS

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L. A. WILSON, JR.

**T**ravis Redmond awakened to the heat of the midday sun whose rays had burned through the early morning mist. Its blinding brilliance ravished his face for several minutes, causing him to shift his position in an effort to avoid the discomfort. He rolled his shoulder against the unexpected hardness of the adjacent wall and flinched in response to an intense pain followed by a shaking chill. He reached for a blanket that was not there. A sticky wetness on his skin disturbed and perplexed him. He strained against heavy eyelids and was assailed by the realization that he was not in bed but lying on concrete in a pool of blood—his blood.

Memphis Red watched Ray Mayweather from across the dimly lit expanse of the musty dance hall. They called it The Pines—a glorified juke joint just outside of Raleigh, North Carolina. The forlorn twang of country rhythms reverberated off the walls. Ray was draping himself over a melancholy blonde woman who seemed less than thrilled to be the object of his affection.

He waited until the beer began needling Ray's bladder to make his move.

"What would it take for a woman like you to dance with an old cowboy like me?" he asked.

The woman's eyes smiled upward at him, and she teased him with contrived reluctance.

"You ain't no cowboy," she chuckled. "And you damn sure ain't old."

"Will you dance with me anyway?"

"I'm waiting on somebody," she replied softly, as a barely perceptible shadow seemed to creep into her mood.

"That beer will keep him peeing for the next half hour. The song will be over by then."

Her smile returned and quickly progressed into a laugh as she took his hand and stood.

The woman settled in against him more quickly than he had expected.

She molded the full length of her body to his

as they swayed to the mournful strains of the music.

"Doesn't that fellow know that you're too beautiful to be left alone?"

"You trying to come on to me?" she asked playfully.

"Yeah."

"Hmmmph, just asking," she replied.

"What the hell are you doin'!?"

The unexpected outburst unnerved the woman, and she turned anxious eyes toward its source. Ray Mayweather stood in the middle of the dance floor, wavering unsteadily from the effects of his last ten beers. She stiffened and moved away from Memphis. Her face tightened at Ray's abrupt hostility.

"Didn't you hear me?" Ray asked again. "Get the hell away from him!"

Ray savagely grasped the woman's arm.

That was all that Memphis needed. He grabbed Ray's right wrist and twisted it until he heard the bone pop. Ray howled in pain, but Memphis wouldn't release his arm. He twisted it back under his shoulder blade, forcing Ray to the floor. As he crumpled, Memphis straightened the arm and forced it across his knee. It either broke or dislocated at the elbow, not that it mattered. He wasn't through yet. He seized the helpless man's left arm and dragged him back to his knees. Ray could only moan in protest. Memphis jerked him harshly, then tried to sling him across the dance floor. He landed on his face with both arms twisted at awkward and unnatural angles.

"You want me to go with you?" the woman asked as Memphis walked away.

"Hell no." Memphis's answer was terse and unemotional. The response had been calculated, and he didn't bother to look at her again as he walked out into the warm Carolina night. He had done everything he needed to do for the moment.

"Memphis Red, hmmph." Rufus Johnson looked the well-

**“That kind of fairy tale  
ain't for folks like us.”**

dressed redhead up and down. "When did you start callin' yourself that? I remember folks callin' you Ahoskie Red."

"Things change," Memphis replied.

"I guess they do," Rufus observed as he scrutinized Memphis's expensive suit. "I guess Ahoskie was too small a town to be the nickname of an important gentleman like you, or did it tell too much about you? Why you wanna know about Angus Haynes anyway?"

"Just curious."

"Sure, Angus Haynes killed his wife. Beat her to death in broad daylight right in front of the courthouse."

"How'd he get away with that?" Memphis unconsciously brushed the lint from the lapels of his double-breasted suit as he spoke.

"Everybody said she fell down the steps and hit her head," Rufus answered.

"Everybody?" Memphis's intense green eyes seemed to question Rufus's veracity.

"Killin' women and niggers ain't never been a serious crime down here, Red. Killin' don't mean nothin' unless you kill somebody important. What's it to you anyway?"

"It's nothing to me, but hell, it's 1958. Times are changing. It ought to be important to all of y'all who have to live down here with his sorry ass."

"Like that don't happen up in New York."

"Maybe."

"Well, you need to get your ass back to New York," Rufus suggested. "Ain't nothin' for you down here but trouble, and if you get in trouble you won't have no friends—not the law, the church, lawyers, nobody."

Memphis turned to meet Rufus's eyes again.

"What about you, Rufus?"

"I ain't got no white friends, Red," he answered succinctly. Memphis nodded his understanding of the remark. For a fleeting second he considered making a retort, but it would have been wasted. Being colored in the South required survival skills, and picking friends wisely was an essential part of it.

"Hello, cowboy."

Memphis stood in response to the soft intrusion of the female voice before looking for its owner.

"I'm surprised to see you here," she continued.

"The only restaurant in town," he explained casually. "Where else you gonna get breakfast?"

His hand made an inviting gesture toward an empty adjacent chair, and she accepted.

"I mean I'm surprised that you're still in town after what you did to Ray."

"I don't suspect that Ray is in any condition to object. Do you?"

"Ray has friends," the woman said.

"Are you one of them?" he asked.

She smiled at him deceptively without answering.

"Who are you anyway?" she asked. "What's your name?"

"Memphis."

She arched her eyebrows in amused surprise.

"That your real name?"

He gave her a noncommittal shrug for an answer.

"You got a last name?"

"Red."

Her amused smile broke down into an unrestrained laugh.

"Okay, if you say so," she managed to reply.

"What's yours?"

"Lena," she answered. "Lena Haynes."

A waitress interrupted to take their order, and Memphis welcomed the intervention. He wasn't big on unplanned encounters. That's when mistakes could occur, and he couldn't afford mistakes. He watched Lena surreptitiously as he ate. She seemed so different from her appearance at their initial encounter. She was a pretty woman and appeared far too intelligent to have placed herself in untenable circumstances without a reason. He could tell that she was trying to feel him out, and he remained intentionally circumspect.

"You're either a very brave man or a fool, Mr. Memphis Red. I haven't decided which yet."

"Bravery is a matter of perception," Memphis replied coolly. "I suspect it takes more courage to associate with a fool than to confront one."

She absorbed Memphis's penetrating stare for several seconds, as if trying to discern the meaning of the remark. She finally excused herself as if ultimately concluding that she had been insulted and her presence unwanted. She hesitated after taking a step away as if delayed by an afterthought.

"Sometimes people are compelled to do things for a reason." She spoke softly and introspectively. "But I'm sure you wouldn't know about things like that, would you?"

She moved away before he could reply. Memphis took a final sip of coffee. What he knew or didn't know was nothing he



planned to discuss with Lena Haynes for the time being.

Memphis slowly coaxed his car down the tortuous driveway that led to a sprawling ranch-style house nestled in a pine grove about a hundred yards from the highway. He rang the doorbell twice before he was greeted by Lena Haynes's surprised countenance.

"You're full of surprises," she said. "I didn't expect to see you, especially here."

"May I come in?"

She stepped aside, allowing him to enter the elegantly appointed foyer.

"I'm glad you came," she volunteered.

It was an admission he hadn't expected and one that he suspected she hadn't

**"You're a dangerous man, Mr. Redmond. I don't like dangerous men."**

intended to allow.

"You're an interesting man, and interesting men are a rarity around here."

His eyes wouldn't leave her face. She was appealing even without makeup. He had known that she would be attracted to him. What he wasn't prepared for was the ripple of emotion that she incited. He hadn't felt that when looking at a woman for some time.

"Well, what should we do now?"

Her coquettish inquiry alone revealed vulnerabilities that would have ordinarily left him pursuing his advantage. He found himself torn, however, between his wants and his needs, and there was a fire in his gut that made him driven for things other than the obvious.

"I need to see Angus Haynes."

He watched the darkness descend over her face and regretted instantly the demons that drove him.

She recovered quickly, and a tiny self-deprecating smile played at the corners of her lips, but her disappointment was apparent.

"Well, Mr. Memphis or whoever you are, I was foolish enough to think that I was the source of your interest."

"You're not foolish—" he began.

"Spare me," she interrupted. "Save your platitudes for my father."

She directed him down a short hallway where Angus Haynes sat in a study laboring over some papers. Angus Haynes languished on

the far side of middle age. He regarded Memphis suspiciously as his daughter whispered in his ear. A younger man who appeared as if his duties could only be physical stood nearby and tried to look intimidating as Lena left the room, closing the door behind her.

The young man patted Memphis down and nodded his confirmation that there was no weapon. Haynes still kept his hands hidden behind his desk as he scrutinized Memphis.

"Memphis Red. An unusual name," Haynes commented. "What is it you think I can do for you?"

"The name's Travis Redmond. Memphis is just what they call me. I believe you have a job opening."

The old man laughed, apparently finding Memphis amusing.

"You job hunting? What makes you think I need help?"

"The help you had was piss-poor, unless Ray Mayweather was just one of your charity causes."

Haynes's eyes narrowed. Apparently Lena hadn't told him who had put Ray out of commission.

"You're a dangerous man, Mr. Redmond. I don't like dangerous men."

"Yeah, you do." Memphis took the liberty of sitting down without being asked. "Besides, I've worked for you before, so I figured that you owed me a job among other things."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Haynes's patience was getting short.

"Vincent Morelli."

Haynes sat back in his chair without speaking. He stared at Memphis for several seconds while flexing his jaw before moving the pistol in his lap to the top of the desk.

"What do you know about Morelli?" he asked.

"He hired me to help him with a job up in New York."

"You're lying," the old man said. "Morelli only hired niggers. I thought it was a personal failing, but he assured me that there was an advantage to working with a disposable product."

"You're wrong. The colored boys could only go so far. That's what happens when you don't do your own planning."

"I'm what they call an enabler, Mr. Redmond. I provide the means. I leave the details to others. Why didn't Morelli ever mention your name?"

"I guess there was no point if he thought I was dead."

Memphis's eyes remained fixed on the gun that lay on the desk between them. Haynes's henchman had moved beyond his peripheral vision and probably stood behind him. He could only imagine what he was preparing to do.

"He said he had problems," Haynes continued.

"To say the least. You and Morelli were pretty smart. He ran the game up North then brought the goods down to this little hole in the wall where nobody would ever think to look. Down here in Chitlin' Switch, North Carolina, you can live like a king."

The old man smiled an unplanned acknowledgement.

"So what's your story, Mr. Redmond? What is it that you think Morelli didn't tell me? What went wrong?"

"The numbers bank was upstairs in a small hotel. It was in Harlem right off Morningside Park. Nightclub on the first level. The thing is, the club was all white—big money, high rollers, plenty of cash. They gambled, bought numbers, dope, whatever. The only thing colored could do was to wait on them. So that was the way in. See, nobody paid any attention to colored boys going in to cook, wait tables, that sort of thing. So we sneaked in with the help that morning. Morelli and me were supposed to be supervisors. We worked our way upstairs where they kept the money, cracked a few heads, and walked away with two hundred fifty grand."

"Why didn't you come down with Morelli?"

"Because somebody shot me."

Memphis watched the old man closely. He had no reaction. He couldn't tell if it was because he already knew the story or whether he had lived long enough to not be surprised by much of anything anymore.

"I woke up in an alley. The three colored boys were dead, and I should have been. It took a year for me to get back on my feet, Mr. Haynes. Morelli was gone, and it took six months more for me to find out about you."

"So I'll bet you're here for your share of the loot, aren't you. Of course, I should just hand some money over to you because I have your word that you were in on it." The sarcasm dripped from Haynes's lips like a bitter poison.

"You could always ask Morelli," Memphis suggested.

"Morelli's dead," Haynes replied unemotionally.

This time it was Memphis's turn to appear nonplussed.

"Heard it was a car accident up in New Jersey," Haynes continued.

"Interesting," Memphis muttered.

"I think we're done here, Mr. Redmond. I don't expect to see you again. Carl can escort you to the door."

Haynes's bodyguard took a step in Memphis's direction.

"Just in case you think we're a bunch of dumb hicks down here, Mr. Redmond, I think you ought to know that we're right on the

edge of the Dismal Swamp. People get lost in there all the time, you know what I mean."

Memphis nodded silently as Carl guided him away. He knew exactly what Haynes meant, and he knew a lot more than that.

Lena was standing by the door as he exited. She rolled her eyes at him and turned away. She was a woman who wore a certain amount of pain on her face, and he suspected that she rarely took chances. Some spark between them had caused her to drop her guard, and her perceived disappointment had only served to reinforce her curiosity.

"Sometimes you get the bear. Sometimes the bear gets you," he whispered. "Sometimes you play it safe, and nobody gets anything." His enigmatic words turned her around. Carl shoved Memphis past her, and her eyes followed him.

"I need a ride back to town, Carl," she announced abruptly. "I'll ride with Mr. Red."

Carl turned and looked past her at Angus Haynes, who fidgeted nervously.

"His name is Redmond, and he has business with Carl," Haynes explained.

"I have something important I have to do, besides I want to talk to him about something personal. What could you all have to do that's so important that it can't wait? Come on, Mr. Redmond. It's not nice to make a girl beg for a ride."

She grabbed her purse and Memphis's arm and pulled him toward his car. Carl stood there perplexed without clear direction from his boss.

Memphis moved quickly to his car. Whatever Haynes's plans for him had been, he had been reluctant to pursue them in front of his daughter. It was an advantage that might not present itself again and one that he was not about to allow to slip past him.

"You crazy as hell!" Rufus regarded Memphis with open-mouthed astonishment after listening to his plan. "You gon' carry your ass back to New York after this is over, but I got to stay here and deal with these bastards after you gone."

"You'll be able to deal a lot better if everything works out, or you can choose to leave. You'll have options, Rufus."

"Options my ass!" Rufus complained. "You've had your monkey-ass up there so long, you forgot what it's like down here. You the one with options. Got that white woman hanging all over you like you got a gold-plated dick. I ain't got the options that you got."

"The best option you've got is that we're friends."

"I told you I ain't got no . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Memphis interrupted. "I've heard it all before."

"What you gon' do with that Haynes gal anyway? You gon' take her back to Never-Never Land and live happily ever after?"

"Maybe. What's it to you?"

"It ain't nothin' to me, but it ought to be something to you. That kind of fairy tale ain't for folks like us. You trust that woman?" Rufus asked in a more subdued voice.

"I don't have to trust her. I know her. I've seen a hundred women like that. Once you understand their pain, you don't have to trust them. They're predictable, and that's a card in your pocket."

"I don't know, man. I don't know." Rufus's reluctance still didn't allow him to commit to Memphis.

"If you do this, Rufus, I'll look out for you. You can count on me. Angus Haynes is a badass, but he ain't as big a dog as he thinks he is. The crap he told me was all lies. Morelli was just another flunky. Haynes pulled all the strings. Haynes ordered him to kill all of us. It was Morelli who shot me, and he had a reason for it."

"Did Morelli really have an accident, or do you think Haynes had him killed to shut him up?"

"Neither one." Memphis's voice was no longer softly persuasive but deadly serious. "I killed him."

Rufus's eyes widened with surprise.

"I tracked him. I beat his ass, and I pushed his car off an embankment, and he was already dead when it hit the bottom."

"You killed him?" Rufus seemed unable to digest the possibility that someone he knew as well as Memphis had actually killed somebody. "I remember when you didn't have that kind of evil in you," he observed sadly.

"Things change," Memphis lamented. "Getting five bullets in your ass changes you. Waking up with half of all the blood in your body spreading across the pavement changes you. Having to lay in it for hours watching people pass because you're too weak to call out changes you. Yeah, I killed his ass, and I'll kill ten more just like him before I let somebody do that to me again."

"What you want me to do?" Rufus asked.

"I want you to beg Angus Haynes for a job. I want you to clean his toilet, scrub his floors, wash his cars, even kiss his ass if you have to. Be a good nigger, then tell me everything you see him do."

"Then what?"

"Then we live happily ever after," Memphis laughed, "just like the book says."

The motel room was shadowy but unintentionally so. Subdued lighting from inadequate bulbs hid the woman's face. Lena stood with her back against the door. It was as if she was frozen in that spot and unable to approach any closer.

Memphis waited on her. He sensed that it wasn't a moment to be aggressive.

She stared at him then looked away, biting her lower lip in uncharacteristic indecision.

"I don't know why I'm here," she confessed. "This isn't like me." She looked at every spot in the room except at Memphis.

"Why I'm throwing myself at a man who wouldn't even tell me his name, I don't know. I'm not ugly. I'm not desperate. What do you think it is?"

"Maybe we both need the same thing," he answered with an air of soul-searching.

"What?"

"Redemption, peace . . . revenge."

Her eyes finally returned to Memphis. It was as if something had finally struck a chord with her.

"Why do you stay here . . . with him?"

"He's my father."

"They say he killed your mother."

"You've been listening to idle gossip. She wasn't my mother. My mother died when I was a child. That was his second wife. You could say she was my stepmother, I suppose, but I was grown when he married her. She wasn't anything to me."

"Did he really kill her?"

She finally stepped away from the door and walked hesitantly across the room and stood close to Memphis. She closed her eyes, leaned against him, and let his arms allay her trembling.

"He killed my mother too," she sobbed unexpectedly.

Memphis held her, not knowing exactly what to say.

"She . . . she overdosed with aspirin, but he drove her to it. It was the only way she could get away from him."

"And that's why you stay, isn't it?"

"I stay because I hate him," she whispered as if she couldn't bear to hear herself say the words. "I stay because I want to remind him every day how much I despise him."

Memphis held her tight. She would stay in this hole in the wall until it killed her in order to make her father suffer. Ray

Mayweather was probably only one in a line of losers with whom she aligned herself in order to spite him. Nothing hurt a man worse than the thought of his daughter wallowing in a toilet with a maggot like Ray Mayweather. It was a slow death for her as well, and it was inevitable unless he offered her an alternative. He guided her toward the bed, and she didn't resist. Afterwards, they would talk about alternatives because he had seen a light in her eyes that made him think that they might exist for him again as well.

Memphis settled in at the Fairfax Motel. Having failed at his initial plan to worm his way into Angus Haynes's world by persuading him to give him a job, he accepted the inevitability of having to be there for the long haul. His venture hadn't been a waste, however. The brief visit to Haynes's home had given him insight into how the old man lived, who he trusted, and how he made things work. More importantly, he had eyes and ears now. Rufus could keep him informed of the old man's activities.

The ensuing weeks had brought complications, however—Lena. Lena was there—in his bed, and more disconcertingly, in his heart. He would have to ask things of her, and he dreaded it. No matter what she said, Angus Haynes was still her father, and there was a price to pay when blood was crossed. That price could mean the end of them.

"Is this what you wanted all along? Is this what brought you here?" she asked repeatedly.

Memphis didn't want to answer, because any answer he gave would be damning, even if it was a lie.

"Ray, me . . . you sought us out," she continued.

"What difference does it make?" he finally countered. "I want what I want, and so do you. If you get what you need, why concern yourself with the process. If I didn't care about you, I'd be doing this without you."

Her spirit calmed. It seemed to be the nature of those who are damned by insecurity. They grasp any fiber that will hold their psyches together until the next challenge drags them down again. When her desperation demanded to know what he wanted of her, he told her—bank records, safe deposit key, whatever it took to find the money, he wanted it.

"He don't do nothin', Memphis. I think he crazy. This whole thing ain't nothin' but a waste of time," Rufus complained. "He hangs around the house all day. He sends me on little dumb



errands. Carl goes to the bank for him once a week. He's on the phone a lot—sounds like out-of-town business, but I couldn't hear none of it. You know something else? He goes and prays over his dead wife's grave every Sunday evening."

Memphis frowned in disbelief.

"Maybe his conscience is bothering him," Lena speculated. "I hear people do that when they think they can see the end of their lives. You know he buried her on the property. The grave is just inside the treeline behind the house."

"What?" Memphis exclaimed.

"This is the country, city boy," Rufus laughed. "You can do whatever you want to do on your property, including burying your relatives."

"He's got fifty thousand dollars in his savings account, and ten thousand in checking. His safe deposit box just has legal papers in it—deeds, insurance," Lena explained.

"Then it's in the house," Memphis said.

It made sense. You couldn't put a quarter million dollars in cash in the bank without drawing attention. He could have spread it out in a lot of different places, but when a man kills for money, he covets it. He wants to keep it close to him. Angus Haynes was sitting on that money. He was sure of it.

It was Friday, and Carl had gone into town to the bank as he did every Friday morning. Angus Haynes sat on his back porch watching Rufus manicure his lawn and hedges while offering liberal suggestions, as if none of Rufus's efforts would ever be adequate.

Lena let Memphis into the house, and he went immediately to the old man's study. Various papers were scattered over the desk as if being victimized by unwelcome eyes had never occurred to Angus Haynes.

Memphis was learning nothing new. He was simply confirming what Lena had already told him. He was about to chalk the little escapade up as a waste when a small silver object on the mantel caught his eye. It was a key and an odd one at that. It was cylindrical with an octagonal hole in the center and large flanges on the proximal end. He had seen one like it a long time ago and found it curious that Angus Haynes would keep this one so handy. Maybe he had a reason, but it damn sure wasn't love.

Everything he knew about Haynes was paradoxical. He was a racist criminal who had settled into a reclusive small town lifestyle while orchestrating capers hundreds of miles away. He was a

respected landowner who had killed his wife in public without a soul willing to acknowledge it. Worst of all, he had lied about her *accidental* death for so long that he probably believed it himself, and he made a weekly pilgrimage to her grave to give it credence.

Memphis hesitated briefly before taking the key. It was in such a prominent place, it would surely be missed. This was an opportunity, however, that was unlikely to recur. He stuffed the key in his pocket and left before the old man returned.

Memphis waited until dark and entered the Haynes property through the forest at the rear of the home. There was a small clearing separated and hidden from the house by a thin line of trees. A full moon illuminated the area, revealing carefully manicured grass and flower beds. In the center was a long concave slab of gray concrete. If he was right, by the time Angus made his Sunday pilgrimage, he would be long gone and a helluva lot more content than at any other time in his life.

The slab was heavy but movable. His fingers ran across the name engraved on the top. He didn't bother to read it. It was a name, but it wasn't important. What was important was what was inside.

He slid the slab to the side, revealing a white metal casket that reflected the moonlight with an eerie glow. Memphis slipped the key out of his pocket. *The dead can't hurt you*, he told himself. If they could, Angus Haynes's wife would have surely found a way out of that casket by now.

The key slid into the opening on the side of the casket perfectly. He turned it slowly with his heart pounding in his throat in anticipation.

Why would a man who hated his wife enough to kill her keep her casket key so close at hand? Why would he visit her grave every Sunday? Nothing in the man's past indicated that he had the slightest remorse for anything he ever did.

He lifted the casket's lid and got his answer immediately. He could barely see the desiccated remains of Angus Haynes's wife. Stuffed throughout the casket were plastic bags filled with money.

Memphis waited with more patience than he was accustomed to having. It was Saturday morning, and Lena should have been there two hours ago. There was a time when he would have simply left. He had a trunk full of money and a fast car. With that kind of leverage, women were generally no problem, but times had

changed. He had changed. He seemed to need something to hold on to no matter how tenuous it was.

Lena pulled into the narrow lane behind him. She was driving one of her father's cars and left it to join him in his. She moved

with a nervous, tight-lipped clumsiness as she threw a few sparse possessions into the back seat.

**“I remember when you didn’t have that kind of evil in you,” Rufus observed sadly.**

“I’m sorry,” she began to explain. “I had trouble getting

away. All hell broke loose. He discovered that the key was missing.”

“Too damned late,” Memphis laughed. “I’ve got to meet Rufus and give him his cut, then we’re out of here.”

“Rufus isn’t coming,” Lena said hesitantly.

Memphis jammed the brakes abruptly.

“Why? What are you talking about?”

“They caught Rufus. They think he stole the key. I was able to sneak away while they were busy with him.”

“Busy! Busy with him? What do you mean?”

“What the hell do you think I mean?” she screamed. “Where . . . where are you going?”

Memphis had pulled the car out of the lane onto the highway and headed back in the direction of the Haynes home.

“They’ll kill him,” he explained.

“This is our chance,” Lena countered. “He doesn’t know you came back. He has no reason to suspect me. Carl is above reproach. Rufus is the only other person who had free access to the house. Can’t you see, Rufus is buying us time.”

“I don’t need that kind of time,” Memphis retorted.

“What difference does it make? He’s just . . .”

Memphis cut her words off with a sudden stare.

“ . . . somebody who works there.”

She completed the sentence, but Memphis wasn’t sure she had completed the thought.

“He’s my friend,” he stated simply and kept driving.

The house appeared deserted. Only the presence of Carl’s truck adjacent to it betrayed the possibility that someone might be there. Memphis entered the house behind Lena with his pistol drawn and ready. It appeared empty as Lena led him from room to room.

A barely audible sound found their ears. It sounded like voices, but its direction was unclear. She showed him a doorway near the kitchen that led to the basement below.

"Where have you been? I've been looking for you," Angus Haynes asked upon seeing his daughter, who stood at the top of the stairs.

Memphis stood in the shadows behind her. He could see immediately why she had cowered without going farther. Rufus lay on the floor curled in the fetal position. He moaned with each movement, and he could see the bruises where Carl had beaten him. He gave Lena a gentle nudge, and she started reluctantly down the steps.

As Memphis stepped into view, he saw Carl look away and followed his line of vision to a shotgun propped against the wall.

"You won't make it," he warned, allowing them to see his gun.

"You!" Angus Haynes exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to get my friend," Memphis answered. "Rufus didn't take your money, Mr. Haynes. I did. Morelli followed your orders to the letter, Mr. Haynes. You told him to kill all the colored boys, so you wouldn't have to pay them. He did just that. At least he tried."

Haynes's mouth dropped open with amazement.

"Can you walk, Rufus?" Memphis asked.

Rufus struggled painfully to his feet and staggered toward the stairs.

"You don't think you're going to get away with this, do you?" Haynes asked.

Rufus stumbled and Lena draped his arm across her shoulder for support to the astonishment of her father. As they passed in front of Memphis, Carl whirled toward the far wall, grabbed the shotgun, and rolled to one knee. Rufus stumbled forward, falling to his knees as Carl jerked the trigger.

Memphis lunged laterally, firing repeatedly toward the kneeling figure. He saw Carl crumple, but it was too late. He had seen the shotgun blast lift Lena up and fling her toward the stairs. They were all frozen for a moment, in pain and in time. All that Memphis could fathom was the pounding of his heart as he absorbed what had just happened.

Carl was dead. He kicked the shotgun away from him and turned toward Lena. He didn't bother to approach her. There was too much blood. Nobody could live having lost that much blood.

Angus Haynes was seated on the floor. He was trembling and crying as Memphis stood over him.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to kill you," he said. "You've lost

everything, and that's exactly what you deserve. Besides, I need you alive to keep the cops off my back." He dropped the empty pistol on the floor in front of Haynes. "You tell the police a story that will explain all of this—why Carl killed Lena and why you killed Carl. I hear you're good at that sort of thing. Your story had better not include me, or I might have to tell them where all of that money came from. I hear it's better to grieve in freedom than to grieve in jail. Think about it. Anyway, in the back of your mind, you're thinking that you'll eventually catch me, get your money back, and possibly kill me. Hold on to that thought. It could happen, but I promise you, the next time I see you I won't be so charitable."

Rufus was halfway up the stairs when Memphis took his arm.

"Who the hell are you?" Haynes cried.

"I'm Travis Redmond from Ahoskie," Memphis answered. "You know about Ahoskie, don't you?"

He smiled at the old man as he saw a terrible light of recognition spread across his face. People in that region knew the name Ahoskie—a town with an inordinate share of those with ambiguous racial appearances.

"Those three men you told Morelli to kill were family—my cousins," Memphis informed him. "Morelli liked to hire men who moved up there from the South. They weren't as streetwise as those who grew up in New York, but they knew how to play the skin game. Morelli didn't get the connection because they just didn't look as white as me. He had to shoot me, because I tried to kill him when I saw what he'd done."

Memphis led Rufus out into the light. It was a beautiful June morning as they drove toward the state's northern border.

"Is this Never-Never Land?" Rufus asked.

"Not yet," Memphis replied.

"I'm sorry about your girl. I might have been wrong about her."

Memphis nodded without speaking.

"I might have been wrong about something else, too," Rufus sighed.

Memphis's eyes left the highway momentarily. Rufus was not a man who often admitted to being mistaken.

"I guess I got at least one white friend," he said, and they both laughed for a long time. ♣

# RUSSELL DAVENPORT AND THE HOUSEKEEPER

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ALEX AUSWAKS

## I.

The house had belonged to the brigadier's father, Major-General George Thundackaray-Harding, who had filled it with beautiful old furniture. Actually, that wasn't quite true. His wife Viola had furnished it, and because the general was very old, and his wife very young, well, much younger than the general, he had let her furnish it as she desired. Viola Thundackaray-Harding had furnished the whole house with superb antique furniture, lovely old china, beautiful carvings, and tapestries. The house and its contents went untouched to their only son William, who followed his father into the army, but, unlike him, did not wait to retire from the army before he took a wife. He married Violet Gumfries, and they lived happily in the large house he had inherited. Had the war lasted longer than it did, or had there been more wars, he probably would have made major general. But fate was unkind to him. When hostilities ceased, he retired as brigadier.

Once he came home, his wife Violet had found that she could not cope with the amount of housework required by such a large establishment and a husband as well. Her part-time maid just would not do, and refused to move in. There was no need to look far for help. The general's batman, a local St. Albans man, had not survived the war, and his wife was available. She accepted the post of housekeeper, moved in with them, and the three settled down contentedly to middle and old age.





Hank Blaustein



It was the housekeeper, Mrs. Stammers, who suggested the three major additions which occurred in the appearance of the house, within and without. The first of these was the installation of central heating. Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding said she could not bear all those men tramping over her house, putting their rough hands on all that well-polished furniture, and, perhaps, breaking her beautiful china. Mrs. Stammers, on the other hand, had set her heart on having the house centrally heated. She proposed a compromise in the best tradition of British public life. Every year, all three of them moved for a month to Spain, where the brigadier rented a villa by the sea. Mrs. Stammers suggested that the two go ahead without her, and as soon as the central heating was installed, she would clear up the mess, repolish the furniture, and then join them for the rest of the holiday. The brigadier, a brave man who had borne the hardships of military service with Spartan fortitude, gallantly offered to eat in Spanish restaurants till she rejoined them, to save his wife the rigors of preparing meals. All this agreed upon, the general and his wife set off. Mrs. Stammers coped extremely well. The workmen were bribed with meals and an occasional tot from the general's supply of whisky, and in the event, there was no need to repolish the furniture or pick up bits of china.

The brigadier's wife, when they all returned from Spain, complained that such a modern innovation as central heating spoiled the internal appearance of the house, clashing with the furniture, the china, and the tapestries. But when winter set in, and she was warm and snug, she decided that the contrast was really quite interesting, and one must not stand in the way of progress.

About ten years later, Mrs. Stammers felt able to introduce yet another innovation: the television. The brigadier's wife was adamant in her refusal to have one, but she had been equally adamant about central heating. The brigadier declared a state of neutrality.

There was no doubt at all that had those been the days when women were allowed as equals within the ranks of the Foreign Office, Mrs. Stammers would have written her name in large letters as a peacemaker, a precursor of the great Dr. Henry Kissinger. She suggested that the television should be installed in her quarters (she had a bedroom and a small sitting room, which she hardly ever used, spending most of her time in attendance or chatting to the general and his wife in their sitting room). Brigadier and Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding could come and

watch it whenever they wished. If they liked it, it would be moved to their sitting room. It took Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding a little longer to become reconciled to this innovation, but the brigadier, a keen sportsman, found watching the horses (inter alia) on television so much more interesting than listening to the races on the radio. Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding gave way, on the grounds that the brigadier should be spared having to climb all the way up to Mrs. Stammers's quarters. When color television arrived, the largest and best set was installed in the sitting room and the old black and white set relegated to the attic (this was not a household that threw anything away). The notion of Mrs. Stammers watching television on her own was never entertained, of course.

A while must have passed before Mrs. Stammers's abilities as a diplomat were tested. By that time, there were not enough buckets and bowls to place under every leak in the roof. A house is constructed differently from a man. In his old age, man gives way from the bottom up, so that long after, say, his feet stumble over every obstacle, no matter how tiny, his head can still grasp great affairs of state and construct remedies for the world's ills. The foundations of a house, on the other hand, are still firm when the roof has long since given way to the ravages of time.

Knowing how Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding felt about workmen violating her furniture, china, and tapestries, Mrs. Stammers suggested that renewing the roof should coincide with the annual holiday to Spain. She would cope with the invasion, while the brigadier, with his usual stoic fortitude, faced Spanish waiters and their offerings. As soon as order was restored, she would join them. This time, Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding agreed without even token resistance.

Unlike London, or any of the great metropolises, where all such arrangements are made through firms so large as to be virtually branches of the civil service, St. Albans has never lost its country air of personal contact and personal service. Such jobs as the installation of central heating, television sets and aerials, and even new roofs on old houses, are carried out by friendly neighborhood types. Many of them, like yeomen of old, in order to preserve the freedom of the individual from the grasping claws of the taxman, will oblige you by accepting cash, so that no record of the transaction should betray its essentially materialistic nature.

The two friendly gentlemen who came to inspect the roof and give a quote did offer the general (very discreetly) the choice of

two prices, depending on whether he wished to pay by check or cash. The general immediately accepted the higher offer on the principle that one must pay for the best. He wrote out a check on the spot, and the two friendly types went on their way, shaking their heads and remarking at the ways of the Almighty bestowing so much on the most profligate.

The day came when Brigadier and Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding flew off to Spain, while Mrs. Stammers armed herself with plenty of beer, sausages, and suchlike in advance of the invasion to entice the workers into a more cooperative frame of mind. The invasion consisted of the two friendly types, who arrived late in the morning, not too early to upset the inhabitants of the house. Mrs. Stammers asked them to mind the furniture, the china, the tapestries, and the other treasures . . . and offered them lunch, which they managed to put away with the help of a little beer. They inquired, discreetly, into the age of the house and its contents, and having been told that everything was of the greatest antiquity, exchanged glances and at the earliest possible moment headed for a public telephone.

Those of you unwise to the ways of the world are unlikely to imagine a link between roofing specialists and the antiques trade. Well, antiques traders have long since recognized that if a house needs to be re-roofed, it is most probably a very old house. The law of probabilities being what it is, an old house will, most likely, have old furniture. Moreover, pursuing probability still further, the owner may be unaware of the value of such old furniture. Therefore, the antiques trade maintains a friendly but very discreet relationship with neighborhood types who specialize in re-roofing old houses. This discreet relationship is maintained by the passage of moneys of various denominations in exchange for information about a new job.

The two neighborhood types telephoned a member of the antiques trade, a gentleman named Harry Clauson, and told him, very excitedly, that there was a household of stuff going back to before the deluge, or just about . . . and a friendly old lady in the house, who had just finished serving them lunch . . . all alone, she was.

Mr. Clauson went round straightaway. He was in his thirties, a handsome, well-dressed man, the sort that old ladies trusted on sight. He wore a natty little hat, carried a walking stick with a heavy silver handle, and looked like a prosperous young merchant banker. Even such as he are supported by the Hertfordshire countryside.

He knocked on the door and Mrs. Stammers answered.

"Good afternoon! Good afternoon, dear lady. Good afternoon!" and he doffed his hat.

"Good afternoon, sir, and what can I do for you?" she asked, hoping it was something.

"What a very lovely house! What a very, very lovely home, indeed. I've just bought one just like it, y'know, and I wondered if I could see how you have furnished yours. You see, I'm single, and it's my very first house, and I'd like to get it right . . . I say, you don't think its frightful cheek of me, do you?"

"Oh, no, not at all. Do come in! Can I offer you a cup of tea, or something a little stronger?" Mr. Clauson was made welcome and invited to look round while she made a cup of tea.

Clauson did look round. There was no doubt he had struck gold dust. None of the stuff would bring newspaper reporters to Sotheby's, but it was all good solid furniture, such as would fetch many pounds from other dealers and even customers. His mouth positively watered at the sight of what he saw.

Mrs. Stammers was used to company, if only the company of the general and his wife. She felt lonely in their absence, and welcomed the arrival of this very charming, very well-spoken gentleman. She hoped he would stay for a while and perhaps even come back. When he had finished his brief inspection, the most delicate sandwiches, the most delicate cakes, and a pot of tea awaited him. A bottle of whisky and two glasses stood by, in reserve.

Clauson beamed his delight, said how very tasty the sandwiches were, passed unkind comments on the younger generation that couldn't even turn out a sandwich without it tasting like cardboard, and sipped the tea. He complimented her on her taste, her foresight in having bought such beautiful things, and how lucky her friends and relatives were to have such a hospitable friend and such a very, very beautiful home to visit.

"Oh, I've hardly any family left, except my Aunt Pru, and she can't travel," she said.

"Oh, I say, what a shame," he said.

"My husband died in the war, and here I am, and lucky to be here."

"And lucky am I to be here, too," he beamed.

When the tea had been drunk, she offered him something a little stronger. He accepted, but only on condition she had a little too. Mrs. Stammers was beginning to enjoy her role as hostess. She wondered why Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding did not seem to enjoy

it, and got so many headaches when guests were due. Slipping into the role of lady of the house, she enjoyed being complimented not only on her taste, but also on her ability to arrange the furniture, as well as the china, not to mention tapestries.

"I say, wouldn't it be marvelous if you'd help me buy for my house," said Mr. Clauson. "With your taste and my bank manager, what a lovely house I'd have. Nearly as lovely as yours."

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly," protested Mrs. Stammers, not knowing where to start looking and afraid of being found out.

"Oh, but look what super taste you have. You must be a very astute buyer," said Mr. Clauson.

"Well, I've got a little confession to make to you," she said. "You won't think any the worse of me for it?"

Mr. Clauson protested his utter devotion (his conversation would not have shamed Mrs. Cartland's villains).

Mrs. Stammers took a deep breath and began her confession, "Actually, it's been in the family for centuries. I just keep it polished . . ."

"And a splendid job you do," said the unsuspecting Mr. Clauson. "But look here, wouldn't it be very nice if you'd sell me just one of those things to start me off, just one, to start me off with." (Mr. Clauson diphthonged the *o* in "off" because someone had told him it was the right thing to do in some circles.)

"Oh, but I couldn't . . . I really have no right . . ."

"Ah, yes, how well I understand, and very commendable in this day and age. You are the guardian of the past, and you wish to see all these very beautiful things preserved for posterity. What a very commendable thought. But my dear lady, I promise you I will look after it with the same devotion, I would keep it just as well polished . . ."

"Oh, how could I!"

"I know what you are thinking, but you are absolutely wrong. You see, I do know something about antique furniture. I wouldn't just give you the right value. I'd give you more than what a dealer would pay. After all, a dealer has to make a profit. Did you know, dear lady, that an antiques dealer has to make a profit, whereas I do not? Did you know, dear lady, that an antiques dealer sells his wares for double what he pays you? I shall pay you exactly what a dealer would sell it for, not what he would buy it for, not what he would sell it for to another dealer. Because these horrible chaps have a special price for each other, not what they would charge an unsuspecting collector like you or me."

At this point he brought out a wad of twenty-pound notes. Most people are used to a few fives and tens, but a wad of twenties is something else. It produces the worst possible effect on the soul (or the psyche). It makes the most generous grasping, the most disinterested in the material goods of this world rapacious. Mr. Clauson saw all this in her face.

"I must tell you something else, dear lady. That very lovely, that very beautiful china cabinet, I really don't know how to break the news to you, but I am sure you would rather hear it from me than from someone else, less well disposed towards you . . ." He leaned forward and his voice began to drop. "That very beautiful china cabinet, full of all those very beautiful china pieces, I notice it has woodworm." He stopped dramatically. "It's got woodworm in several places. Too late to be treated! And do you know what that means? It will spread. It will spread to other pieces of furniture, till they too are full of woodworm. And when all your furniture, all your beautiful, beautiful furniture is full of woodworm . . ." He paused and very dramatically jabbed a finger into the air, all the while fanning out the banknotes in his other hand. "The woodworm will permeate the floor," he said very slowly, drawing out every syllable, "and when it has permeated the floor . . ." By this time his voice had dropped so low she had to strain her ears to hear what he was saying. He waved his hands to show everything collapsing, "The house will collapse with all your lovely, lovely things in it. Dear lady, what are you going to do then?"

Mrs. Stammers got terribly agitated. "Cannot anything be done?" she wailed.

"Ah, but yes," he said gravely, and paused, "ah, but yes."

"What, what can be done?"

"Harry Clauson to the rescue. I shall take that cabinet off your hands, and I shall even pay you enough to get another."

"Oh, but I couldn't. I just couldn't . . . it's not as if . . . I am only here as, as . . ."

"A guardian, a worthy guardian of the past. But what of the future? Think of the future. Think of all that woodworm permeating the house and then . . . boom boom!"

Here he began to lay out the banknotes as if they were so many cards being laid out for solitaire.

"Would you like me to see if there is anything else which has woodworm?"

She nodded dumbly.

Clauson went round the sitting room and then the dining room.

There was woodworm there . . . and there . . . and there . . . and, oh what a shame . . . here too. And every time he found woodworm in a piece of furniture he laid down banknotes on it, as if this would remove the infestation. After a while, Clauson got quite carried away himself.

"There are several things I'll have to check tomorrow—I'm not sure how bad the woodworm is, but I wouldn't like to remove anything which could be saved. Besides, I've run out of money and a gentleman never pays by check . . . certainly not . . . it's cash amongst friends."

It just so happened that a friend of Mr. Clauson had a large van, that he was close by, and they would take all that woodwormy stuff away with the least possible inconvenience to the dear, dear lady.

The very next day Mr. Clauson called again with Bill. Bill, he explained, was a woodworm inspector, a woodworm inspector of the greatest expertise and probity. It wouldn't cost her anything. Bill would do it as a personal favor to him, because he, Harry Clauson, had given him a testimonial which led to his present employment.

Bill declared certain items as being safe, others as being not too advanced in infestation, and therefore capable of being saved by appropriate treatment, and still others as beyond hope. The items to be treated, he told her, she could rescue herself by using some of the special liquid available only to the trade. Since she was a friend of Mr. Clauson, who had been so good to him, he'd brought her a goodly supply, which she could apply at leisure. But she was never to tell anyone where it had come from. The tin was, of course, unmarked.

As for Harry Clauson, the sight of all the furniture and china which he hoped to lay his hands on was causing him to lose his cool, his gentlemanly manner. His speech was no longer as polished as it had been the previous day. He actually referred to the *readies* (meaning cash), and he gulped down the sandwiches instead of nibbling at them. He drank more of the general's whisky than he should have, and pressed it on Mrs. Stammers, who drank it, and coughed and spluttered because she wasn't used to that amount of the stuff.

Harry Clauson and his partner went out and celebrated that night. "I haven't even started on the upstairs," he said, "and then there is all that china. That's what I'd like to get my hands on."

"Don't overdo it, Harry" said his partner. "The old lady might tumble to you yet."



"So what," said Harry dismissively. "It's all perfectly legal! There's no comeback. If she's stupid enough to sell at the price I offer, it's her lookout. It's not as if I'm stealing it."

As work on the roof progressed, Mrs. Stammers fed the workmen, bringing out the food and tea or beer to them, managing to keep them out of the house as much as possible, confining them to the kitchen, so that they could not see the house being progressively emptied . . . unless they wondered what the van was constantly taking away.

Harry Clauson called on her daily.

He described in minute detail to her how he was trying very hard to save the lovely furniture. It was costing him a lot of money, more than he had paid her for it, but it was well worth it, worth every penny, he assured her. He too would be as worthy a custodian of the past as she was, he explained. In the meantime, he was faced with another dilemma. All that lovely furniture and nothing to put in it, whereas she had all that china and nowhere to put it. Now, he wasn't a dealer, and therefore would not dream of paying her the price a dealer would offer, but he would pay whatever each item would sell for in a really good class of establishment. And he insisted on adding just a little bit because he was saving all that money on petrol and, of course, his own time, and, moreover, had the incomparable pleasure of her company, the benefit of her experience, knowledge, and appreciation of the truly, the incomparably beautiful.

As well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, or in for a penny, in for a pound. Mrs. Stammers let the lot go. All that lovely lolly that Clauson tempted her with had got her thinking about her old age. She had no savings to look forward to, and a state pension to a woman like her smacked of the poorhouse and the almshouse.

Came the day when the roof was ready.

The two friendly types who had laid it gathered up their tools and departed, having damaged only a minute part of the lawn, over which Mrs. Stammers sadly poured the substance brought by Bill, friend of Mr. Clauson, and tossed the tin into the garbage, which the excellent garbage disposal system of St. Albans collected regularly every Friday.

Then Mrs. Stammers packed her things, had her hair washed and set, because contact with Mr. Clauson and all that money had revealed a better world to her than she had suspected existed. Having ordered a hire car to take her to the airport, she flew away.

As for Harry Clauson, he too decided it might be an idea to go on holiday for a while, just in case the old lady came to her senses, or her friends warned her she had been dunned.

## II.

The first that Russell Davenport heard of the affair at the Thundackaray-Harding household was a telephone call from the inimitable Bradford.

Bradford's official job was to authorize insurance payments to policyholders of the giant Combined Insurances. He seemed to have a nose for fraud and deception of any kind, and was authorized to investigate cases himself, or refer them to the police, or to employ outside investigators. He was a small, neat man, with a trim mustache. His hobby was collecting cigarette cards, on which subject he was reputed to be a considerable authority. He claimed it was easier to carry them round than the tiles that Davenport collected.

Bradford was always at his desk early. Davenport knew that if the telephone rang correspondingly early and kept on ringing, it must be Bradford. Bradford had visited him, knew the layout of the house, and how long it took to get to the telephone from its remotest part.

"Hullo, Russell," said Bradford crisply. "Can we book you for a few days?"

"Oh, yes. Is it interesting?"

"Well, I don't know. It's a robbery. A very old policyholder of ours, and the son of a policyholder. Everything is insured under our good-as-new policy, which means we are obliged to pay out the present market value of the items insured. All the antique furniture was taken, the old china, but they left the tapestries and the color telly. It was a very professional job by specialists while the owners were away on holiday."

"The stuff is halfway across Europe by now," said Russell Davenport. "You know there isn't a hope in hell of finding any of it."

"Well, first of all, the chappie knows one or two people on our board, so I've got pressure on my tail. Wants to know what we intend to do about it," said Bradford.

"Oh!" said Russell. He well knew the power behind the right name knowing the right names. "What about the police?"

"They're doing their best, poor sods. Nobody got murdered or raped, and if they had to inquire into every robbery . . . they'll probably send out a list of the stolen goods at the end of the

month. Look, Russell, it's Monday today. Try all this week. Just dig around. They must have been specialists, they only took the best. Which means they're still around and still operating. Now, if you've got pencil and paper, it's a fairly long surname. You'll have to practice how to pronounce it."

Having got the name, address, and telephone number, and practiced getting the name out fluently, Russell Davenport first telephoned the Thundackaray-Harding residence. When a female voice answered, he introduced himself and asked to speak to the brigadier.

"Oh, you are going to catch those thieves, aren't you? I just hope you do, and put them behind bars for the rest of their wicked lives," burst forth from the other end.

"Well, I shall have a jolly good try," said Davenport, somewhat amused. The voice didn't sound that of a general's wife, so he said, "May I ask, who is speaking?"

"Oh, I'm just the housekeeper, sir, and here comes the brigadier himself."

Russell arranged to come over straightaway, and then telephoned his friend Peter Strevens, a member of the Hertfordshire CID. "I'll buy you lunch at the Barn," he offered.

"That sounds as if you need assistance with your inquiries," said Peter Strevens.

"That's right. I'll be on an expense account, too, so you can have four courses," countered Russell.

Strevens laughed at the private joke between them. It was a great mystery how the Barn, in the middle of St. Albans, managed to serve such delicious food at such low prices.

Brigadier Thundackaray-Harding opened the door himself. He was tall and thin, with a long, horselike face and long ears. He had large eyes that stared over Russell's head. "Jolly good show," he said, taking Russell's hand in a vicelike grip. "Jolly good show." He led Russell into the sitting room. It looked bare.

"Is it too early to offer you anything to drink?" he asked.

"Just tea or coffee, whichever is most convenient."

The brigadier left the room and returned a few minutes later. "Tea on the way! And now I'm at your disposal."

"Tell me everything that happened," said Russell.

"Not much to tell. Wife and I came back from holidays abroad. We go to Spain every year. Walked into the house. All gone!"

"I believe you have a housekeeper."

"Oh, yes, but she was on holiday with us. Wife passed out. Mrs. Stammers, that's our housekeeper, gave her a shot of whis-

ky. Rang the police." He spoke in clipped segments. "Left the whisky. At least," he added.

"The housekeeper was definitely on holiday with you," said Russell deliberately.

"Of course. One of the family. Just about. Ex-batman's widow. Solid."

"How long has she been with you?"

"Since I resigned the army. First-rate. Honest as the day is long. Barking up the wrong tree there, ol' boy. Ah, here she comes. Thank you, Mrs. Stammers."

Mrs. Stammers bustled in with the tea tray. Her face was tanned from the Spanish sun. She exuded honesty, forthrightness, and goodwill. The china on the tea tray looked emergency army issue from long ago. "You must be the gentleman who called earlier," she said as she began to pour. "Milk, sir? Sugar? Isn't it a shame, all those lovely things. Been in the family for generations, haven't they?"

"Well, actually, my mother . . ." began the brigadier.

"Ever such a long time," she said. "And there wasn't one I haven't polished and repolished over and over."

The brigadier nodded his head vigorously and opened his mouth to speak, but she went on, "Didn't polish all them lovely things for some villain to . . . oh, sir, you will find all those lovely things, won't you?"

"I'll do my best," said Russell, somewhat overwhelmed.

"Jolly good show," said the brigadier.

Mrs. Stammers bustled out.

"I've got to ask you, who knew you had all these things," said Russell, "and I suppose you'll say, quite a lot of people. But have you had anyone strange in the house recently, someone you've never had before, repairmen, tradesmen?"

"Had a new roof put in. Two chappies. Very decent sort. Ad in local paper. Got their names somewhere."

"Just like that? Out of the local paper?"

"Oh, yes, very sound. Quotation on the spot. Gave 'em a check. Told 'em to get on with it."

Russell spoke to Mrs. Stammers who, beyond swearing she knew every piece of the stolen furniture intimately, every flaw in every grain of wood, and was sure her fingerprints were embedded in them all, and every piece of china, could not add anything more.

Bradford was sending the list of stolen articles by special messenger, who would be arriving after lunch. Russell didn't have any-

thing to do till then, so he went to his luncheon appointment at the Barn.

Peter Strevens and Russell Davenport were roughly the same age and the same build. Strevens had lighter hair and looked older. Russell maintained a certain boyish charm, as if he had never grown up. He collected avidly—mainly books and tiles. Peter preferred hunting and fishing. Russell wanted to know what had happened when the police were called. "There's not much I can tell you. The brigadier had a new roof put on the house. We sent someone to talk to the fellows who did it. It was the old story: see no evil, hear no evil, say no evil, hadn't been inside the house, never mentioned the job to anyone.

"And your opinion?" asked Russell.

"Well, I'm not saying that roof repairers are all bent, but of the type who are, either they tip off a gang of thieves, or they tip off a bent antiques dealer. The antiques dealer comes round and offers to buy any furniture that has woodworm and proceeds to find lots of it. They've got some good plays, these gents."

After lunch, Russell went to see an old friend, Trevor Hathaway, a retired actor. He had a favor to ask, which might be dangerous, but he'd do everything to minimize the danger. He told him the whole story. Trevor lived in an old house not far from where the Thundackaray-Hardings lived, just off the Beaconsfield Road. He was a bachelor, and the house was full of all sorts of furniture, mostly junk, but there were several valuable pieces. Trevor did as Russell asked. He rang the same roof repairers. The two offered to come round the same evening. Trevor played the innocent. He was about to go on holiday, this coming Sunday, in fact. He wanted to ensure the roof was alright. He'd just moved into the house, and there was all this valuable stuff lying around. He'd hate it to get wet if it rained. There were some paintings. Wouldn't do for the rain to wash the paint off. He wouldn't know what to do with the canvases, what? It was a consummate performance.

When the two men left Hathaway's house with Russell on their tail, they stopped their van at the post office in Beaconsfield Road, where there was a public telephone. They rang someone from there. Russell followed them home and then went back to Trevor Hathaway.

"What now?" asked Trevor.

"They telephoned someone as soon as they left your place. Sunday, you move into my place and I take up residence here with sandwiches and a thermos."

"If they don't wait till Sunday and come tonight," said Trevor, "I'll hide my head under a pillow. I was never a hero, even on the stage."

### III.

Russell's telephone rang at about eleven the following morning.

"I say, I'm fearfully sorry," said Hathaway's voice, "someone very neighborly has popped in for drinkies and we're having a neighborly chat. Shan't be able to make it for lunch."

"Thank you," said Russell. He raced for his car.

A van was parked round the corner from Trevor Hathaway's house, so he kept out of sight of it, but took down the number. After a while, a jaunty man came out and signaled the van. Hathaway was standing on the porch. The van was backed into Hathaway's drive. The two men, the driver of the van and the man who had emerged, went inside and came out with a large chest of drawers, which they placed in the van. There were handshakes all round and the van drove off with the two men inside. Russell followed them to a house just outside St. Albans. The sign outside read:

ANTIQUES  
We'd rather buy  
than sell . . . but  
we do both.

The two men took out the chest from the back of the van and dumped it unceremoniously in the yard.

Russell drove back to Hathaway's house. He was sitting over a large whisky and grinning from ear to ear. "I think I've just made myself a few bob."

"How?"

"This chappie came along this morning and said he'd heard I was new in the street and he thought he'd welcome me to the neighborhood. Lovely old house, said he, and could he look round."

"Casing the joint," said Russell. "And openly, too."

"Said his name was Harry Clauson and he'd just come into a bit of money and thought he'd get some ideas on how to furnish his place from a gentleman like myself, who was bound to have excellent taste." He raised his glass to toast himself.

"Well, we had a drink and he said, wouldn't it be a good idea if I let him have one of my pieces to start his furniture collection

with. Well, you know, a sprat to catch a mackerel. He offered me seventy-five quid for an old chest of drawers I've had which I knew to be worthless. He said it had woodworm. I let it go. He'll be back tomorrow, by the way, as I said I was going on holiday and he suggested I might want to sell a few more things for holiday money."

"Strange," said Russell. "I wasn't expecting this. Thanks very much, Trev. You must be starving. I am."

Russell had never seen the strange man who had so openly called on his friend Hathaway and bought a chest of drawers at an inflated price to convince him that he (the buyer) was naive. Was this done to case the joint? To see whether there was anything else worth stealing? Coincidence? No, there'd been a van waiting outside, so coincidence was off. He decided to call on the antiques establishment to which he had followed the man. He drove there after lunch, walked in through the door, and the man who had driven the van came out of the office.

"Are you looking for something in particular, sir, or just looking round?" he asked Russell.

"Well, I've just come into a little money and I thought I'd like to buy some antique furniture. I've never bought any before."

"A splendid idea," the man said, "and a very good investment in these inflationary times." He tapped the side of his nose, "No capital gains tax, either."

"That's what I thought. It's just that I don't know very much about these things."

"You've come to the right place, then. It's all genuine antiques here. What's more, we buy cheap and sell cheap. And since you are a beginner, I'm going to encourage you by knocking ten, no, fifteen percent off anything you buy. Call it beginner's luck."

"That's very kind of you. May I look round?"

"Please do. You just look round and tell me what you like. Remember, ten, no, I said fifteen percent off anything that catches your eye. Free delivery. The best things are in the back. That's for connoisseurs. Believe me, it's the best place to spend your money." The man retreated into his office, and Russell began to walk slowly round the showroom and then the back. He had a list of the stolen property in his pocket, but he knew a lot of it by heart already.

He didn't have to look far. In one of the rooms at the back virtually the entire loot, furniture with china, were displayed. His eyes widened.

He went back and stepped into the man's office without



knocking. The man looked up. There was a grim look on Russell's face. Russell placed his card before him. The man looked at it uneasily.

"As you can see, I am an insurance investigator."

"You're a bloody spy," said the man petulantly.

"There's a roomful of furniture and china at the back," said Russell evenly, "which was stolen from Brigadier Thundackaray-Harding. Do you want to answer a few questions here, or at the police station?"

"Hey, you're having me on. There's no stolen property here."

Russell pulled the list out of his pocket and threw it in front of the man, "Look for yourself!"

"So the goods are identical."

"Alright," said Russell, "shall we call the police here, or do we go along to the station?"

"Just a moment," said the man, looking thoroughly frightened. "It's my partner who brought that in, not me."

"Get him."

"He won't be in until . . ."

"Close up. Let's take a ride down to the police station."

"No, no, actually, I think I can get him."

A quarter of an hour later tires squealed and Clauson appeared. "What's going on here?" His face was flushed.

"You've got a roomful of stolen furniture in the back," said Russell.

"The stuff you bought from that old bitch," interrupted his partner.

"Oh, that," said Clauson airily. "I bought it all from the lady of the house. My partner here was a witness. Weren't you?"

"Yes, that's right," said the partner.

"I'll bet!" said Russell.

"Of course I did. Paid her a good price, too."

"Papers to prove it? Receipts?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Ever heard of the tax man?"

"Ever heard of the C.I.D.?" riposted Russell.

"I suppose the old bitch now claims it's been stolen and wants to put in a claim. Can't trust people these days, can you? Disgusting. Well, you can tell her . . ."

"And the date on which you purportedly bought the goods?" asked Russell.

"No purported about it," said Clauson. "As a matter of fact, the week before I went on holiday . . . that would be . . ." He consulted a wall calendar and read off the dates.

Russell smiled. "The lady of the house was in Spain at the time herself."

"You're putting me on!"

"The lady of the house, and her husband, and their housekeeper were on holiday in Spain." said Russell coldly.

"Look, if it was stolen, would I be displaying all that openly?"

"Relying on so much stuff being identical," said Russell. "Very clever. You've probably read Poe?"

"Who the hell's Poe?" snarled Clauson.

"Well, let's send for the coppers and they'll sort it out." Russell wanted the police to go over the furniture for fingerprints. In case the two hadn't wiped the furniture clean, there could be the fingerprints of anyone in the household, especially Mrs. Stammers.

"Just a minute," said Clauson. "The roof repairers. They saw me come in and out."

"The ones who tipped you off?" asked Russell.

"How do you know?" asked Clauson and looked as if he could bite his own lip.

"Little bird went twee twee," said Russell.

"Funny."

"Alright, let's get your friends here," said Russell.

"I'll tell you the truth," said Clauson. "The roof repairers tipped me off there was this old lady all by herself and a house full of stuff she didn't appreciate one bit. But I didn't steal anything. Soft-soaped her a bit and bought it. Would I display it like that if . . ."

Russell shrugged his shoulders. "Get those guys here, now."

"I can't. They're working."

"Where?"

"As a matter of fact, I do know, but . . ."

"We all three go, or its the coppers."

"I won't be pressured," said Clauson.

"No, of course not," said Russell evenly. "You're going of your own free will. As is your partner. Come on."

They drove off in a strained silence, then Clauson spoke. "You don't really believe I nicked the stuff, do you?"

Russell didn't answer.

They arrived at the house where the two men were working on the roof. The two recognized the antiques dealers, stopped working for a moment, but then went on somewhat more hurriedly. Clauson gestured for them to come down. They ignored him, He went nearer and hailed them. The two men looked at each other

and came slowly down the long ladder. "I told you not to come to me when I'm at work," said one acting as spokesman.

"It's urgent," said Clauson. "And I need your help."

"What?" the man said ungraciously.

"Do you remember that job you did at . . ." He groped in his head for a name, but it eluded him, so he named the street. "Well, the old lady is now putting in an insurance claim for the stuff I bought from her. Can you testify I bought it fair and square and didn't steal it?" asked Clauson irritably.

The man spat.

"Anything you'd buy would be a steal," the man said with heavy irony.

"You don't seem to mind," said Clauson hotly. "You take my money."

"Look, mate, I'm not testifying to nuttin', I'm not going into court. If I went into court for you, it'd be all over the place. I'd never get another job hereabouts. It's mostly word o' mouth in a small town like this."

"You don't have to go to court. Just tell this fellow here." He gestured at Russell, "Just tell him what days I was there collecting the stuff in the van."

"Copper? They've been to see us already." The man turned to Russell suspiciously.

"I'm a private investigator working for an insurance company," said Russell, "and I am investigating the theft of property . . ."

The man stepped back. "Me and my mate have a job to do."

"Hey, you can't do that," Clauson said. "I need a witness."

"Don't know nuttin'!"

"Hey, and you . . ." Clauson called to the other man.

The man shook his head and the two backed toward their ladder.

"I'll pay you," shrieked Clauson, rushing after them. His partner held him back.

"I'll kill them," Clauson said through clenched teeth.

"Go easy, Harry," his partner said.

"Well, gentlemen," Russell said, "I've got a compromise solution to offer. You return the stuff now, today, and I'll even arrange the transport, and we needn't call the police at all. My only concern is to ensure that my clients . . ."

"Look here," Clauson said, taking out a billfold. "I've got a better idea, Just give me half an hour's start . . ."

Russell laughed and mimicked the roof worker. "I'd never get another job hereabouts. It's mostly word o' mouth in a small town like this. Either we move the stuff back right away, or it's the

police. It's the old lady's word against yours, and they were in Spain for the dates you gave. Her husband is a brigadier. What jury will take your word against hers?"

"I don't want trouble," said the partner solicitously.

"You just come along with me and we'll confront her," Clauson said aggressively.

Russell said very mildly, "My job is to get the stuff back to the owners, not to find the thieves. That's for the police. As far as I'm concerned, I've found the stolen goods, and I hope they are all there. You are quite welcome to go to the police yourself, as I will, if that stuff isn't moving within the next hour."

"I don't want to go to the police," said Clauson. "As far as I'm concerned, she can be married to the entire British army, I want to confront that bitch in your presence."

"Either I call a van to collect the stuff right now, or I call the police right now."

Clauson swore and raged, but he gave in.

It was only later that Russell discovered from a chance remark that Mrs. Stammers had not been with the Thundackaray-Hardings all that time. He wondered if there had been some confusion in identity. Finally, he told the whole story to Peter Strevens. Was there any chance that Clauson was telling the truth but was afraid a police investigation would reveal stolen goods on his premises? Strevens was quite amused. "Well, serve the bastard right. One way or another, he got it in the eye. We'll go through the place, but not just yet. He will probably keep his nose clean for a while."

Russell telephoned Bradford and told him the whole story. Bradford laughed his head off, then said, "I don't suppose there's any point in telling the brigadier, he'd never believe it, that is, if it is true. But Clauson sounds like the sort of man who'd make up a story like that. Just to be on the safe side, I'll put a note on the file. If ever they make another claim, we'll have you investigate the housekeeper."

But that was not the end of the story.

#### IV.

Several months later Russell was dining with a friend at the Lily Langtry, round the corner from where he lived, when all of a sudden there was a great activity on the part of the staff as Brigadier Thundackaray-Harding swept in. His wife was on one arm and Mrs. Stammers on the other. The latter was dressed in pink velvet,

with a white fur collar, a fur hat, and many bright appendages hanging round her.

"Ooooo, there's our nice detective," said Mrs. Stammers. The three came over and she signaled the waiter. "This gentleman and his lady friend are joining us at our table, and their bill is on me, too." Russell demurred, but the waiters were already enlarging the reserved table and moving food and cutlery. Introductions were made.

"Mrs. Stammers is now our companion and friend and lives with us," said the brigadier.

"Well, I've always lived with you, if you know what I mean," said Mrs. Stammers. "It's just that I'm not their housekeeper any more," she explained to Russell. "I had a bit of luck, I did. Got another housekeeper, but she doesn't live on the premises."

"Oh, yes," said Russell.

"It was all my Aunt Pru's doing. Hardly knew I had an aunt, and then I got this letter. Poor Aunt Pru." Mrs. Stammers dabbed at her eyes with a monogrammed serviette. "She wanted me to have her money before she died. Didn't want the tax to get it. So she asked me to come and collect it. Said to bring a bodyguard along. You know, Mr. Davenport, I was going to ask you to come and protect me and help bring the money somewhere safe. Didn't know whether you'd think it wicked to avoid the tax that way. But the brigadier said he'd come along."

She smiled at the brigadier and he beamed back.

"So we went, and we got Aunt Pru's money, and I put it all into premium bonds, every cent right up to the maximum, and we put some in the general's name, and Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding's name, 'cause we're friends now, and we trust each other, don't we? And we've been striking it lucky every month in the premium bonds lottery, haven't we?"

"Got a big prize," said Mrs. Thundackaray-Harding suddenly.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Stammers and waved her hand at the waiter. "More bubbly, luv!"

# BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

**T**he Poisoned Pen, one of the largest mystery bookstores in the country, was originally conceived as "a hobby to support my book habit," says owner Barbara Peters; "no one is more surprised than I that it has turned out to be a big business." Since its opening in 1989, the store has moved and expanded twice, though it is still within a block of its original location in Scottsdale, Arizona.

With 15,000 titles in stock, a monthly newsletter with 5,000 subscribers, discussion groups and several buyers' clubs, and some 200 author events per year, this "hobby" has become an important source of books and information not only to residents of Arizona, but to readers around the world. Seventy percent of the store's business is mail-order, reports Peters, and ten percent of that is international.

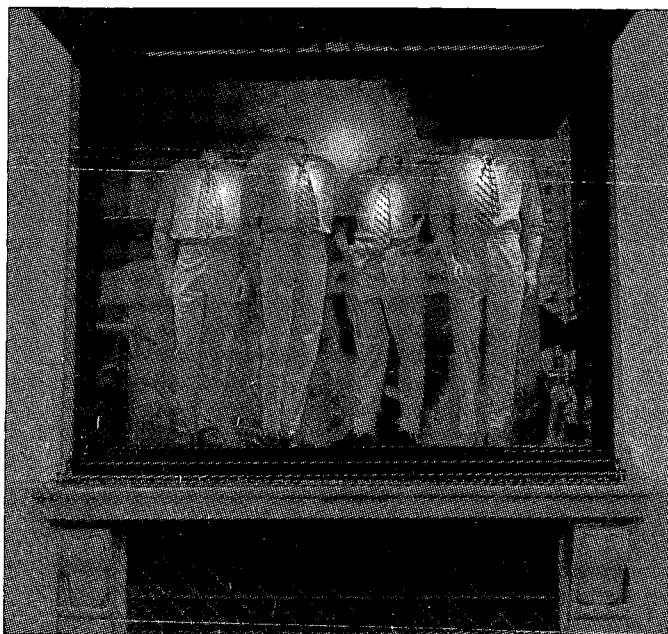
Locally, the store is one of only two independent booksellers in the Phoenix area and is the primary source of books for many of its loyal customers. Visitors are greeted with the outline of a body painted on the floor, and a "rogues gallery" of authors who have read there. The store's author events are well known throughout the Southwest and can draw audiences of hundreds of people. But while the store is quite able to pack 'em in, "my favorite events run fifteen to fifty people," says Peters; "then they are about the book, not about crowd control." Lately, Peters has also been coordinating author appearances with local libraries, sometimes booking authors for multiple events in the area. "We try to offer several opportunities for the public to see an author," she notes.

Peters feels that there is less traditional mystery published today, as publishers now emphasize crime fiction instead. Such traditional mysteries are the focus of a related enterprise, Poisoned Pen Press, which is run by her husband, Robert Rosenwald, and for which Peters serves as editor. "Big publishing and chain retailing have narrowed the range of books available to people," she feels, and Poisoned Pen Press exists to provide an alternative.

Even though the store enjoys a national and international reputation, Peters is eager to support Southwestern writers and novels. Asked for some works by local authors, she recommends: Tony Hillerman, *The Blessing Way*; Betty Webb, *Desert Noir*; Sinclair Browning, *Rode Hard, Put Away Dead*; Jon Talton, *Concrete Desert*; and J. A. Jance, *Partner in Crime*. Both the author events and the mail-order business are very labor intensive, Peters acknowledges, "but if there is one reason why the bookstore is successful," she says, "it is because we have a terrific staff."

THE POISONED PEN ♦ [www.poisonedpen.com](http://www.poisonedpen.com)  
4014 N. Goldwater Blvd., Scottsdale, AZ 85251, 480-947-2974

# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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## The Adventure of the Headhunter

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January/February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.



# FALL GUY

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DAVE REDDALL

**T**he snow was tapering off, coming straight down now. Small flakes that glistened like diamond dust. Even without the wind it was bitterly cold.

Kermit stashed the morning's haul of returnable cans and bottles where they would be safe and set off for Liberty Street. He needed gloves, and Saturday was the day people usually chose to drop off food and clothing at the shelter.

Luck was with him for once: a brand new pair of insulated gloves. The right size, too. Kermit was a big man and rarely found anything to fit. As he stood in front of the shelter, flexing his fingers in his new gloves, Cadillac Jack stepped up and said good morning.

Most of the people on the street had nicknames. Kermit quickly became Froggie, from the television puppet. He detested the name but, short of kicking someone's slats in, there was little he could do about it. And despite his size, he had a horror of violence.

Cadillac Jack got his nickname when he appeared at the shelter a couple of weeks earlier. He was dropped off by a midnight blue Coupe DeVille and you had to wonder, because he looked then like he looked now: ragged. But climbing out of a Caddy, nonetheless. He came and went and pretty much kept to himself, rarely engaging in conversation. Which made this morning's greeting unusual.

"Want to make a quick hundred bucks, Frogman?"

Kermit was on guard at once. There was no such thing as free money.

"How?"

"Simple. You just fall down."

Kermit grinned. "Hell, Jack. I've been known to do that on occasion."

Jack moved closer, eyes narrowed. He was short and scrawny, not enough meat on him to make a sick man a sandwich, thought Kermit. But he vaguely remembered from his school days that Stalin was only about five foot four, and one of his legs was

shorter than the other. Kermit wasn't sure who Stalin was—probably a Nazi—but he knew that the little man had killed a lot of people, so you just never knew. And right now Cadillac Jack seemed just a little menacing.

"Listen up, Froggie. You need to be stone cold sober for this gig. Otherwise, forget it."

Kermit considered what a hundred dollars would mean: a fistful of lottery tickets, something to drink besides cheap muscatel, a half hour with one of the whores down on Exeter Street.

"Okay. What's the deal?"

"You know where the Big League Deli is on Dudley Avenue?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Right in front there's a heave in the sidewalk—one section's raised up an inch or two." He flashed a thin smile. "Hell, someone could trip on that, get hurt."

"Like me," said Kermit.

Jack nodded. "At exactly twelve forty-five this afternoon you take a flop on that sidewalk. Make it a good one, and don't get up right away. Your hip hurts. Your back hurts. You got some serious pain, right? So you lay there awhile until a guy wearing a long red scarf offers to drive you to the E.R. Go with him."

"When do I get paid?"

"This guy will take you to see someone who'll give you the yard." He looked Kermit over critically. "Put on your best clothes, if you got any. And for crissake, shave. You want to make a good impression, don't you?"

It was a piece of cake.

Kermit arrived at the designated time, stubbed his foot on the broken sidewalk, and went pinwheeling to the ground. He lay there, moaning and refusing help, until a well-dressed man in a red scarf offered assistance.

Now he leaned back in the plush leather seat of the blue Cadillac, shooting occasional glances at the silent driver.

"I was good, huh?"

"Yeah, a regular Bogart. Get out at the next corner. Go into the Starlight Lounge, take a booth, and wear this." He handed Kermit the scarf. "Someone will be right along."

The Starlight was a step above the places Kermit frequented when he had some money, but not a very big step. The tabletops were grimy and the place smelled of disinfectant and stale beer. An elderly number slept quietly, the side of his face flattened against the mahogany bar.

A few minutes later a corpulent balding man in a blue overcoat squeezed in across from Kermit. The veins in his nose were busted, and despite the weather, he was sweating.

"The scarf, please."

Kermit surrendered the scarf and the fat man handed him fifty dollars.

"Supposed to be a hundred," said Kermit.

"Shut up and listen. My name is Victor Quantz. I'm your lawyer. In a few minutes you will leave here and walk across the street. Next to the Army Navy Store you'll see a clinic. Go in. Listen to what the doctor says and then do it. Do it without any questions, without any deviation. Got it?"

Kermit nodded. The lawyer struggled to his feet and leaned over the table, jabbing a fleshy forefinger at Kermit.

"Don't screw up."

The door of the clinic was open. In the dimly lit room stood an X-ray machine covered in dust, an examination table with an unused paper sheet, and a metal desk. Seated behind the desk was a gaunt, grayhaired man wearing dark glasses. Several forms were spread before him on the desk.

"Have a seat. I'm Doctor LaFleur. You've had a nasty fall, Mr.—What is your name?"

"Kermit McGuire."

"Age?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Alright, Mr. McGuire. You are suffering from decreased range of motion, tenderness of the paraspinal areas, decreased deep-tendon reflexes, positive straight-leg raising of only, oh, say ten percent, decreased abduction of the hips, and—are you married? Girlfriend?"

"Uh-uh."

"Very well. No loss of consortium." He put down the pen and steeped his hands. "As I said, a bad fall. You will be partially disabled for some time." He produced a pair of crutches. "You will need these. Now please attend closely. You are incapable of any kind of normal activity." He tapped the desktop for emphasis. "Do not, for any reason, go anywhere without the crutches, and do not discuss your case with anyone. There may be insurance investigators nosing around. Now, sign here, and here."

He handed Kermit fifty dollars and a business card.

"Starting next week you'll begin seeing this woman. She's a chiropractor."

"A what?"

"A backcracker. Her office is a couple of blocks from the shelter, so you can walk. But remember—"

"I know. Use the crutches."

By Tuesday the money was gone and Kermit was growing weary of the invalid act. It made collecting cans and bottles, which he was now forced to resume, awkward and time consuming. If he'd known ahead of time that it was going to be a long-term deal, he would have asked for two hundred. Maybe he would anyway next time he saw Cadillac Jack.

He was working his way up Washington Street, pleased with the day's take. The large plastic garbage bag was nearly full. He set it down and hobbled over to a refuse can. As he was removing the lid, he caught a rapid motion out of the corner of his eye.

The kid wore a black hooded sweatshirt and hightop sneakers. And he was fast. Before Kermit could react, the kid snatched up the bag of cans and darted across the street.

Kermit immediately gave chase, dodging cars and pedestrians as he sprinted east up Washington. The thief vaulted a low picket fence and disappeared behind a three-decker. Kermit leapt the fence and rounded the corner of the house, but the kid was already a block away and Kermit was winded.

"Little bastard!" he fumed. Five bucks or so, gone with the wind. He made his way back down the street to where his crutches lay.

And then he spotted the videocamera.

It was perched on the shoulder of a very large black man and it was pointed directly at Kermit. The cameraman's face bore a wide grin.

A setup! And like a fool he'd fallen for it. Hadn't the doctor warned him about insurance investigators? And he clearly remembered the look on Quantz's face when he'd said, "Don't screw up."

As he stood wondering what to do next, his gaze wandered across the street, then froze. Standing at the curb, one hand resting on the hood of the blue Cadillac, was the man who had driven him to meet Quantz. He wasn't moving, just staring fixedly at Kermit.

Fear then hit him like a lead weight. The crutches were still several feet away and who knew how much of Kermit's blunder the man had witnessed. Probably all of it.

Kermit turned and ran. He didn't stop until he reached Hudson Boulevard where he ducked into the Elite Diner. He ordered coffee and took a seat where he could keep an eye on the street.

The magnitude of what he had done was beginning to register. Scamming the insurance companies was, he assumed, a serious

crime. Through his carelessness he had made everyone involved subject to exposure. A lot of people were going to be very angry.

He checked his resources: five dollars and eleven cents, minus the coffee. Why had he blown through the hundred so fast? If only he'd put some aside he could get a room, or even leave town. Instead, he'd pissed it away on scratch tickets and booze and—he'd squared accounts with Gomez.

He paid for the coffee and walked three blocks to the Mediterranean Hotel, the roach trap where Gomez lived. Gomez could afford a room because he received SSI "crazy checks," as he called them. Kermit wasn't sure if Gomez was crazy or not, but he was decidedly weird. For a while he had wandered around town pointing a television remote control unit at the passing cars and people and screaming that he couldn't change the channel. They sent him to Bridgewater for observation after that, but he was back in a month, although without the remote.

Kermit had paid Gomez a visit on the day of his "accident." He had owed his friend twenty dollars for some time and was glad for the opportunity to finally pay it back. When Gomez had inquired about the crutches, Kermit told him the whole story. He was quite proud of himself at the time.

He entered the small room and was immediately blinded. Walls and ceiling were lined with aluminum foil, which bounced the light from the bare bulb pitilessly into his eyes. Even the window was covered. Gomez sat in an armchair that leaked stuffing, smoking a cigarette.

"What's this?" Kermit gestured at the walls.

"Protection," Gomez said, lighting a fresh cigarette from the old.

"From what?"

"The rays, man."

"What rays?"

"Jeez, Froggie, don't you watch the news, read the papers? Rays. Radio waves, television waves, shortwaves, microwaves, X-rays, cosmic rays. Guy on the tube says we're all swimming in an ocean of electronic waves." He inhaled deeply, reducing a quarter of the cigarette to ash. "Not me. Uh-uh. I stay in as much as I can. The tinfoil keeps the rays out. You ever seen what a microwave does to a piece of meat? Well, we're meat."

"Yeah, sure. Look, I need a place to stay. Just for a few days. I was wondering if maybe—"

"Cops?" said Gomez, visibly alarmed.

"No, nothing like that. Couple of guys are looking for me. No big deal. How about it?"

Gomez squinted through the haze of cigarette smoke. "Where are your crutches, by the way?"

"Ah, that's history. Deal fell through."

Gomez smoked furiously for a minute as he considered his friend's answer.

"Deal fell through, or something went wrong?"

Kermit shifted his weight from one foot to the other and then, because he was not a practiced liar and because he needed to talk to someone about his problem, he told Gomez what had transpired.

"So that's it, and now I need a place to hole up until things cool off a little. What do you say?"

Gomez shook his head vigorously. "I don't think so, Froggie. I mean, I don't feel comfortable with guests, you know? This is a small space. Someone else is here, it feels like they're using up the air. I have trouble breathing. Uh-uh. No can do."

Kermit noted the overflowing ashtrays and was about to suggest that there would be more air to breathe if Gomez simply stopped smoking. But he didn't want to offend his friend, and besides he sensed it would be futile: the sudden fear in the room was as palpable as the cigarette smoke.

After a few more minutes of small talk, Kermit returned to the street, hair and clothes reeking of tobacco. It was dark now and snowing harder. Light from the stores spilled out onto the snowy sidewalks and for a moment the scene reminded him of the town he'd grown up in. Not for the first time he wondered what his life would have been like had he stayed there, gone to work for his father, maybe met a girl.

A bus ground by, filling his nose with diesel fumes. Kermit snapped to and turned his mind to the problem at hand. He felt exposed on the street and there was no way he could return to the shelter. He decided to seek help from the smartest person he knew, the Professor.

The Professor's tent consisted of several blue tarps stretched over an old tent frame and held down at the edges by cinder blocks. It was located roughly in the middle of eighty acres of woods behind the municipal airport, land that had so far escaped development and sometimes served as shelter for the homeless.

Kermit came prepared with an offering, a bottle of Night Train, which had used up the last of his money. He explained his predicament and fell silent. There was only one seat, a weathered barber chair that served the Professor as both chair and bed. Kermit

had to remain standing, the alternative being to sit on the damp ground.

Light from a pair of flickering candles chased shadows across the Professor's face. He was a huge man, bigger even than Kermit, his size accentuated by a full gray beard and bulky overcoat. It was rumored that he had once been a lawyer. For a few bucks or a bottle he would render advice on state and local ordinances governing vagrancy, trespassing, petty larceny, and other statutes of concern to his constituents, or on anything else that anyone cared to ask.

To Kermit he said, "It's a clear case of *a fronte praecipitium a tergo lupi*, Froggie."

"I don't understand Spanish, Professor."

"Latin, m'boy. It's Latin meaning there's a precipice before you and wolves behind. A tough spot." He took a judicious sip of Night Train and grimaced.

"First, the wolf, a k a Victor Quantz. He is a disreputable man, a blot upon the legal profession. You, Froggie, faked a fall on a broken sidewalk. You can be certain that Quantz, or one of his people, had already filed a report on that sidewalk some time ago with the DPW. As of that moment, the city was officially on notice and had a specified amount of time in which to repair the structure. After the allotted time passed and no repairs were made, the city became legally liable for any injuries at that location. The DPW is busy. It can't get to every pothole and heave." Another sip. Another grimace.

"So, Victor Quantz sends out one of his cappers, in this case Cadillac Jack, to find a 'victim,' ideally someone who will work for peanuts." He gave Kermit a significant look.

Kermit hung his head. "A hundred bucks," he admitted.

"A *hundred bucks*?" roared the Professor. "Why you imbecile! Within a month or two the quack and the backcracker would have submitted bills for at least six or eight thousand dollars to whatever company insures the city against liability. They'd probably have settled the case for thirty, forty, maybe fifty thousand bucks." He sighed. "Oh well, your immediate problem is Quantz. Let me tell you a little story about the learned counselor.

"Jimmy Dukes owed him a couple of grand. He kept coming up with excuses, but no money. One night a couple of Quantz's boys grab Jimmy off the street and drive him out to the docks. They take away his clothes, give him a quarter, jam him into a phone booth, and tell him to call his employer, Ross the Boss Capello, another citizen of questionable repute and a competitor, you might say, of Quantz's.



"Anyway, they tell Jimmy to tell Capello he should pay the debt off for him. To make sure Capello gets the message, they pour gasoline into the booth, shut the door, and light a match. The poor bastard's on the phone screaming and begging Capello to for crissake give Quantz the money." He raised the bottle again. A healthy swallow this time.

"What happened?"

The Professor frowned. "Capello hung up. They dropped the match. Jimmy died a horrible death. And nobody has held out on Victor Quantz since. Which was the point of the exercise."

Snow hissed against the roof of the tent. Kermit shivered. He felt nauseous.

"As to the precipice, by now Quantz has put the word out that he wants to talk to you. And maybe that's all he wants to do. Talk." He raised the bottle, examined the dwindling contents, lowered it again. "Or maybe not."

"What am I going to do?"

The Professor shrugged. "Hide, leave town, or get your affairs in order. I really don't care." He levered the chair back to a reclining position.

"But whatever you do, don't come back here."

Kermit had barely regained the street when a voice behind him said, "Hey, Frogman. Just the guy I'm looking for."

Kermit turned, ready to flee.

"It's cool," said Cadillac Jack, hands held at shoulder height. "I'm here to help."

"Jesus, Jack, I'm sorry! Some little punk, a guy with a camera, I don't know—" Kermit was practically blubbering. Jack threw a friendly arm around the big man's shoulders.

"No sweat, Froggie."

"I'll keep my mouth shut, Jack. Honest."

"Like I say, no sweat. These things happen. Goddam insurance investigators, they got a bag of tricks."

"But Quantz—"

"Don't worry. It's all square. You see, if you aren't here, you can't be squeezed. So, how do you feel about relocating? To Florida, say?"

"Seriously?"

Jack placed hand over heart. "Absolutely. Think about it—sunny and warm all year, beautiful babes, sandy beaches, no more god-damn snow. Hell, I'd go with you if I could. What do you say?"

"Sure, Jack, sure."

"Quantz is an okay guy, Frögman." He glanced over his shoulder, lowered his voice. "Just between you and me, I think he shorted you on the deal, what with a hundred bucks. But he's willing to front you, say four or five hundred, to get you started off on the right foot in Florida, to sort of make up for it. But," he raised a cautionary finger, "you can't come back here no more. What the hell, after a few days down there you won't want to anyway. Now, here's how it works." He slipped two twenties into Kermit's pocket. "You go on down to Mahoney's, have a few pops. I got some details to work out. I'll be by at closing time to pick you up, take you to the station. Look for the blue Caddy. That'll be me."

Kermit stepped out of Mahoney's and heard the lock snap behind him.

One o'clock. Cold. No blue Caddy. No pedestrians. Nothing moving. The only sound the metronomic click of the traffic light flashing amber-amber-amber. He pulled on his new gloves and started across the street. Then he stopped.

There were three of them. The sodium lamps threw their shadows onto the fresh snow like oil slicks.

All four streets out of the intersection were blocked, three by the men now converging on him, the fourth by a construction barricade. Kermit cast a hopeful look back at Mahoney's. There was still light showing inside. He ran to the door and began pounding.

"Leo, open up! For God's sake, let me in!"

The bartender's pale, neon-streaked face appeared at a window.

"Leo, it's me, Froggie. Open up. I'm in trouble here."

Leo's impassive eyes swiveled left, then right, noting the three men, the desolate streets beyond, the snowy halos shrouding the street lamps.

With a quick motion, the shade was pulled down.

Kermit sagged, then turned, looking for a way out, finding none.

The last of the lights in the tavern went out. The snow was slanting down now, driven by a bitter east wind.

The three men closed in, faces eclipsed by hat brims and upturned collars.

Kermit put his back to the wall and waited. ♠

# TRUMPETER SWAN

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JOHN F. DOBBYN

**I**t's post time.

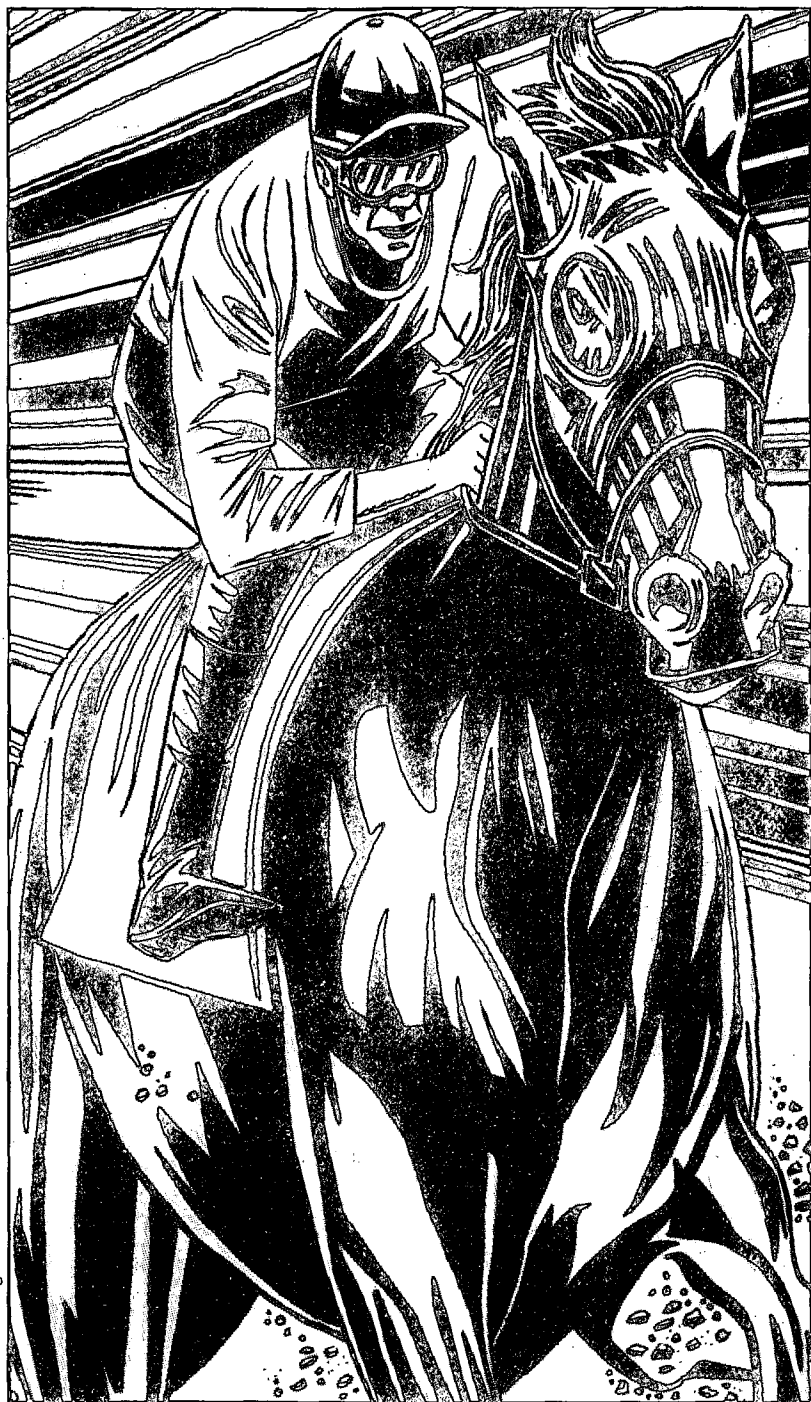
Four years I've been a jockey, and it still rings my bell every time. Every nerve in my body sends its own wake-up call. I don't think about it consciously, but my subconscious goes on full alert to the fact that one wrong shift of weight could put me under the cleats of every horse behind me. Consciously, I have just one thought. Win.

The clang of the doors of the starting gate behind me sent shivers through the body of the black three-year-old colt I was riding. I could feel him jackhammering the ground with his front feet. I grabbed a fistful of mane in case the noise of loading the horse beside me sent my colt exploding through the gate. The trainer, Marty Trait, warned me that it happened last time out. Forewarned is forearmed.

I wasn't used to the quirks of this colt, Trumpeter Swan. I was usually up on Fair Dawn, the horse they were loading in number six. He's another coal black three year old. The two could be brothers. They're both owned by Mr. Fitzroy and trained by Marty. It's what they call an "entry" when two horses of the same stable are entered in the same race.

I heard Marty tell Bobby Pastore, the other jockey, to take Fair Dawn to the lead before the first turn and set a blistering pace. He told me to hang about fifth until we reach the end of the backstretch, about three quarters of the way through the mile and an eighth course. Swan has late speed and staying power. I figured to breeze past the horses that wore themselves out trying to keep up with Dawn. It had rained the evening before, but by dawn the track had dried out and it was lightning fast.

When Marty gave me the instructions, I asked him why he switched me off of Fair Dawn and onto the Swan. He just said I



Daniel Galanaugh

have better hands than Bobby for the drive down the stretch. News to me, but I'm just the jock.

Just before I slipped the race goggles down over my eyes, I caught a look at Mr. Fitzroy holding the rail in the front of his owner's box. Even from there, his face looked bloodless and strained. I knew how much this race meant to him and the whole stable. For one wrenching moment I let myself think of where I'd be if Mr. Fitzroy had never been born. I was determined to win that race for him if I had to carry the horse across the wire.

I heard the "All in." Swan dropped his head. I pulled it up straight and braced. The bell screamed and sent nine horses strung tighter than piano wire firing out of the gate.

Bobby gave Dawn two quick slaps of the whip, and he catapulted with a speed that I always found miraculous to the front of the pack. He cleared the second horse by enough to rein Dawn in close to the inside rail. This is where the leader would usually settle down to a pace that kept him just ahead of the pack in a distance run, but I could see Bobby turning it on. One more smack of the whip and he hand-rode him into the first turn as if it were the home stretch.

I could see the next three horses, the major contenders, driving to prevent Bobby from getting too big a lead. I hung back a comfortable fifth. I'm thinking, "Go ahead. Knock yourselves out."

I hit thirty yards before the first turn. I was just easing my horse to the right to get him on firmer ground a few feet off the rail. I looked up to see Bobby leaning into the turn, and then *bam*. One second he's in total control, the next second he's spilling to the left, arms and legs flailing as he's caught in the grinder of the horses' hooves behind him. Thank God I was far enough off the rail to be able to avoid him, but I felt a shivering sickness.

My first instinct was to rein up and run to him, but I heard the wail of the ambulance flying across the track. I knew they'd do what they could for Bobby. In the meantime, nothing stops a race.

I'm sitting in fourth place as we cruise around the turn and down the backstretch. I pass the six furlong pole, and that alarm goes off in my gut that says "Now!"

I've watched Bobby ride Trumpeter Swan a half dozen times, and I know what this colt's made of. He's half speed, half courage, and one hundred percent heart. I shift my weight low and forward until I'm practically one with his neck and give him the call.

"C'mon, Swan. Give it to me."

I swear, he knows what I want. No need for the whip. It's like slipping a Maserati into high gear. I have to adjust my balance for the shock of the speed.

I see a bit of daylight as the horses ahead of me go a bit wide into the final turn. I take him to the rail to save ground, and he drives. The cleats on the hooves of the horses we pass come inches from his fine-boned legs, but he gives me what I ask for. He explodes through the hole like a driving halfback.

We straighten into the homestretch on top by half a length. It's a cruise from here to the wire. Then we hit the eighth pole. I can feel an almost imperceptible shift into a lower gear. The heart and the drive are there, but the speed is noticeably coming off.

I glance back, and the pack is coming. I go to the whip, and I can feel the Swan strain to give me more, but it just isn't there. We go under the wire in fifth position.

I could feel my heart torn out in two directions. I couldn't imagine what Mr. Fitz must have been feeling. I knew the stable was on a losing streak that was breaking its back. This was the purse that could have set it right. I'd have given anything to hand it to him. But a deeper concern was Bobby Pastore.

I cantered Swan back to where the groom was waiting to take him. The trainer, Marty, was with him, glowing red as a beet.

"What happened out there, O'Casey?"

"I don't know, Marty. Bobby just went off to the left. I couldn't see why. How is he?"

Marty flipped out.

"Never mind that. What happened to the Swan? You rode him like he was running in cement."

I slid out of the saddle.

"He just ran out of gas."

He was in my face, looking down from his six foot two on my five foot three.

"Maybe you ran out of gas. He never faded like that before."

I was stunned. Marty knew me from the time I was an apprentice. He agreed to take me on as a regular stable jockey when Mr. Fitz brought me in. I rode to win, and we always got along.

"I rode according to your orders, Marty. The horse weakened. You better check with the vet."

Marty turned on his heels and walked off.

"Marty."

He looked over his shoulder.

"Where'd they take Bobby?"

He gave a look I didn't understand and spat out, "To the morgue."



I had three more races to ride that afternoon for other owners. My heart was definitely not in it, but somehow I managed to pull off a win in the last race of the afternoon. Each of us has a valet assigned to take care of our equipment after a race. When Tony, my valet, met me in the winner's circle to take my saddle, he whispered, "Billy, you heard?"

I stood next to him as he undid the girth.

"What?"

"Bobby's dead."

It came as a shock all over again.

"I know."

"They arrested Mr. Fitzroy."

I couldn't even get the words out. He read the question in my face.

"They say it's murder. They charged Mr. Fitzroy with murdering Bobby."

I sat in the jockey's room for an hour after a shower. I was too stunned and drained to move. I thought of the lowest ebb of my life, when I'd been hit with a year's suspension as a jockey. They called it race fixing, but I was following the orders of a trainer who wanted his horse brought in out of the money to build the odds for his next race. It's done. It's not unheard of, but I make no excuses.

The year's suspension was deliberately extreme. The Massachusetts Racing Commission was drowning in bad press over corruption. They went on a witch hunt to clean up their own image. I was branded a leper. There wasn't an owner or trainer who dared to come near me for fear of being sucked into the out-cast club.

During that period, the pickings were slim for the O'Casey family. My dad was a disabled police officer, and my sister and I had to scramble to keep a good beef stew on the table. Racing was all I knew at the age of twenty-six, except for a stint of investigative work in the Air Force. Since I was cut off from the former, I cashed in on the latter by picking up a private investigator's license. I filled out the time doing low-life work for a choice collection of human specimens until I could get back on a horse.

Then Mr. Fitz got involved. He and my dad grew up together in a little bastion of Irish immigrants called South Boston. They



stayed close as brothers even though they went in different directions. My dad followed his own father's footsteps onto the Boston police force. Mr. Fitz followed his Irish love of horses. He eventually owned a stable of the best horses that ran at Suffolk Downs. He passed the gift along, because he took in any kid with a hard-luck story and not much chance of breaking out. I know because when I was sixteen, I was one of them.

Around the time I was suspended, Mr. Fitz was in Europe. When he got back and found out about my suspension and general blackballing he hit the roof smoking. I didn't hear about it until much later. Mr. Fitz blew into the office of the racing secretary like General Patton in a tank. He had one ace. Mr. Fitz had entered the one horse that could draw a record crowd to Suffolk Downs in the Massachusetts Handicap. His horse, Captain Mack, could be another Secretariat, and the crowd loved him. Mr. Fitz laid it on the line with no compromise—my license would be restored in twenty-four hours or he'd scratch Captain Mack.

The secretary was no fool. He knew that racing in New England was on shaky ground and a great run by a horse like Mack could bring back the gate. I had my license back the next day. And to rub salt in the wound of the Racing Commission, Mr. Fitz put me up on Captain Mack.

I was a bag of nerves for that race, but Captain Mack and I won it. I've been riding for Mr. Fitz every day since, and thanks to him the other owners have been giving me steady mounts, too. There's no ducking it. It was a gutsy move by Mr. Fitz. He was bucking the tightest blackball since the days of the McCarthy commie witch-hunt.

I realized sitting there that I owed Mr. Fitz more than I could ever repay by riding, but maybe there was another way. Two things I took from my private investigator experience during the suspension were a P.I. license and a crash course on the fundamentals of ferreting out information that people wanted to keep hidden. If I couldn't give Mr. Fitz a win, maybe I could give him something else he needed.

I knew that Mr. Fitz's first call would have been to Michael Hunter of the law firm of Devlin and Hunter. Michael was like a son to him. Michael and Mr. Devlin had pulled a number of kids in the stable through legal scrapes over the years. Again, yours truly speaks from experience.

I got to Michael's office just as he was getting back from Mr. Fitz's arraignment.

"What's it look like, Mike?"

"Looks like we've got some work to do, Billy. Come on in."

He waved me into the awesome office at the end of the corridor where the daunting presence of himself, Mr. Lex Devlin, riveted us with a gaze over horn-shell reading glasses. The look was a clear demand for the reason for breaking his train of concentration.

Mike waved me into a seat, which raised the Devlin eyebrows another notch. Fortunately, Mike took the lead.

"I just got back from an arraignment, Mr. D. This one should go to the top of our list."

Michael filled Mr. Devlin in on what little he knew, which was that a jockey had been killed in a riding incident and Mr. Fitz was being charged with murder. I sensed from the concentration in Mr. Devlin's burning eyes that Mr. Fitz was automatically at the top of his list. I also sensed an old South Boston connection.

"Who's handling this at the district attorney's office, Michael?"

Mr. Devlin had the number half dialed when Michael said, "Pat O'Connor." Mr. Devlin hit the speaker button to let us hear the conversation.

The receptionist answered.

"Anne, let me speak to Pat."

"I'll see if he's here, Mr. Devlin."

"No you won't. I haven't got time to hold for his pleasure. Tell that old warhorse if he's not on the line in ten seconds I'll tell the *Globe* he wears his wife's dresses."

A scratchy male voice boomed through the speaker.

"You do, and I'll tell 'em it's to take you out dancing. What do you want, Lex? As if I didn't know."

"Patrick Francis O'Connor, have you lost the half ounce of brains the good Lord gave you? What's this about Miles Fitzroy?"

"I have no choice, Lex. I know you two go back. I've known Fitz since the old Southie days, too. But I can't overlook the evidence."

"Which brings me to my next question."

"I know. What's the evidence? I'll be straight with you, Lex. The office got a call to get out to Suffolk Downs. Anonymous, of course. It was right after that jockey, Bobby Pastore, took a fall. He was dead when the ambulance got to him. The caller said to check the stirrup strap on Pastore's saddle. He told us where to find it. We got a search warrant for Fitz's personal trunk in the stable tack room. We found the saddle and the strap under a pile of blankets. The left stirrup strap was cut with a knife three-quarters of the way through. It looks like it tore the rest of the way when the jockey put extra weight on it going into the first turn."

"It could have been a plant."

"It could. On the other hand, there's more. We have a motive. The caller said that Pastore was blackmailing Fitz for something. We don't know what just yet, but we will. We checked Pastore's bank account and found deposits at the beginning of each of the last three months. They start at ten thousand dollars and climb about five thousand dollars each month."

"And that's your case?"

"It's enough to get an indictment, Lex. I hate it worse than you do. Especially on this side of it. But I can't duck it."

"And have you thought of this, Patrick? Every time I've seen Fitz in the past few months he's been more worried about losing the stable. He hit a stretch of bad racing luck. That race could have pulled him out of the hole—at least given him breathing space ahead of the creditors. Why would he kill the jockey that could have won it for him?"

"Because he could have it both ways. He had an entry. The other horse was supposed to win the race. By the time the jockey, Pastore, went over the side, his horse had already drawn out the other horses. I hate it when I'm this clever. Especially now."

"Alright, Clarence Darrow, I've got one more. Pastore rode in other races today before that one. His saddle would have been in the hands of his valet or on another horse right up to the time for that race. When did he make the cut?"

"I guess you never went to the track with Fitz. It was the cowboy in him. He always did the saddling of his own horses for a race. He could have cut the stirrup strap up under the saddle where it wouldn't show just before Pastore got on the horse."

I missed the next part of the conversation because I grabbed Mike Hunter's sleeve and whispered, "Mike, I have to see that saddle and strap."

"Why so?"

"It's a phoney. It's planted. Mr. Fitz didn't do this."

Mike whispered, "How do you know?"

I gave him a look like, How could you think otherwise?

"You'd make a terrible lawyer, Billy. You'd be blindsided by half your clients."

But he caught Mr. Devlin's eye and passed the word. Mr. Devlin put his hand over the speakerphone and mouthed the word, "Why?"

Mike said, "Because Billy's the only one of us who knows which side of a saddle you sit on."

Mr. Devlin was back on the speakerphone. "Pat, I need a favor. It's an easy one. I'm sending an investigator over right now. Billy

O'Casey. I want you to let him see the saddle and strap."

"Alright, Lex. You'd see it eventually. I shouldn't say this, but half of me hopes he finds something."

Michael greased our way through the district attorney's suite of offices to the evidence room. The officer on duty brought out the saddle and handed me the stirrup strap. The cut three quarters of the way through was clear. It took me about four seconds to check it out, and we were out of there.

When we hit the street, I pulled Michael over to a quiet section of sidewalk.

"Mike, it's a setup. I knew it before, but now I can prove it."

He looked doubtful, but interested.

"That strap was a plant. It's not the stirrup strap that was on Bobby's saddle during the race."

"How do you know?"

"Only another jockey would know this. Bobby rode ace-deuce. He always kept the left stirrup a couple of inches shorter than the right. It gave him extra leverage on the turns since they're all to the left. Some of the jocks do it. It's the kind of thing we talk about among ourselves."

"And?"

"That strap is buckled to exactly the same length as the right side. Whoever planted it thought that's how it should be."

I checked my watch. It was a little after seven P.M.

"And that leads to another thought, Mike."

"What's that?"

I could see he was still weighing the effect of what I'd said.

"We need to go for a ride. Your car or mine?"

We got to the backside of the track at Suffolk Downs at about quarter of eight. The late spring sun was fading, and I knew we had to hustle to work in light. The maintenance crew had gone for the day, so we were able to drive right up to where they keep the track equipment.

"Leave your suit coat in the car and roll up your sleeves, Mike. This could be worse than mucking out stables."

Mike Hunter looked squeamish about plodding his five hundred dollar Bally loafers through the soft dirt at the edge of the track, but by the time we got down on our knees to grovel in it, he chalked the whole outfit, shoes to tie, up to expenses.

I showed him how to get down under the six-foot-wide drags that they pull over the dirt track after every race to smooth out

the surface. We had to feel all the way to the bottom of each of the dozens of tynes that dig into the dirt.

I was nearly finished checking one of the drags when Mike yelled over from the one he was checking.

"Bingo!"

I looked over at a picture I'll remember forever. He was up on his knees, crystal white shirt and Brooks Brothers pants so full of dirt he looked like he'd been planted, grin on his face, and holding a stirrup strap over his head. I checked the length.

"That's the one that killed Bobby Pastore, Mike."

He hauled himself up and caught his breath.

"Now tell me how you knew it was there."

"I didn't, but it was a fair hunch. I wondered why someone would plant evidence on Mr. Fitz that wasn't the real strap. It had to be because they didn't have the real one. I figured that was because it probably fell off the saddle when it broke and got ground into the track. It was either still out there, and we'd never find it, or it got caught in the tynes of the drag after the race. We lucked out, Mike. You're a mess. You've got to take better care of your clothes."

**O**n the ride back I had time to think. I'd been so focused on Bobby's death and the charges against Mr. Fitz that I'd blocked out everything else. Now I began thinking that if someone was fixing the race by eliminating Bobby and Fair Dawn, they'd have had to fix Trumpeter Swan, too. A bet on one part of the entry is a bet on both. If either part of an entry wins, it pays off.

That got me to thinking about how Trumpeter Swan had faded in the homestretch. It was one more odd circumstance that caused the stable to lose a race. I'm no vet, but Swan felt like a sound horse up to the moment he faded. Maybe it wasn't just racing luck. Maybe it all tied together. That gave birth to an exploding thought that led to a quick U-turn and a heavy foot on the gas back to the track.

I drove up to the room at the end of the track stables where the exercise riders sleep. We came in the back door and saw a group of them playing cards at the far end of the room. Manny Vasquez was the regular exercise boy for Trumpeter Swan. I only needed a second to check his boots under his bunk.

I called Manny over and told him we needed a word with him outside. Manny got a little itchy by the time we walked over to the outside rail of the track.

"Been doing a little night riding, Manny?"

"Whatcha mean, Billy?"

He was looking back and forth between us. I doubt that he could read an expression in the dark, which made it more ominous. I left a pause.

"You know it rained last night, Manny. Long about two in the morning the track must have been pretty muddy. The rain stopped at midnight, so it was dry around six when you and the boys exercise the horses, right?"

"I guess so." He wasn't sure what he was admitting to.

"So sometime last night before the track dried out, probably around two in the morning when no one was around, you took Trumpeter Swan out to the track. You galloped the lungs out of him, cleaned him up, and put him back. No one would know in the morning. Except during the race in the afternoon, when he hit the homestretch, his energy gave out. He was running on dead legs. That's a neat way to fix a race, Manny."

"You out of your mind, Billy." He started back to the barracks.

"Hey, Manny. I've got your boots. They're the only ones in there with mud in the seams. You want to talk to me or the district attorney?"

That stopped him, but it didn't get anything out of him.

"Only we're not talking about race fixing here, Manny. We're talking about murder. Bobby Pastore was killed so that race could be fixed."

I could sense the panic setting in.

"I don't know nothin' about Bobby. I had nothin' to do with any of that."

Mike added his contribution. "See, Manny, it doesn't matter. You were in on the fix. If someone gets killed in the course of it, which Bobby did, you're up to your ears. The charge could be murder. In for a penny is in for a pound, as they say."

He was stone silent. I walked over to him.

"We're not after you, Manny. We want whoever killed Bobby and laid the blame on Mr. Fitz. But so help me, if you don't open up, I'll turn you over."

He was shaking now.

"Who gave you your orders, Manny?"

He was scared, confused, and frozen in silence. I thought he needed a little heat to unfreeze him. I said to Michael, "Make the call."

Mike took the cue. He flipped open his cell phone and started punching in numbers. I have no idea whom he was calling. Mike

probably didn't either. But I'm sure it registered with Manny as the police, the D.A., or maybe immigration—whichever topped his list of fears.

Manny bolted over close to us and said in a low voice, "Mr. Trait." "Marty Trait, the trainer?" I wanted to be sure Michael heard it. "Yeah."

"Did he ever have you do that before?" I didn't know because I wasn't the regular jockey on Swan.

"Yeah, a few times."

I looked at Michael. "So much for Mr. Fitz's bad racing luck."

I stepped closer to Manny so I could keep my voice down. "Manny, I need something else, and you better put your heart into it. Marty Trait wasn't doing this on his own. Who was in it with him? Give me anything."

There was silence, but this time I knew Manny was thinking, not stalling. Finally he whispered, "There's a guy comes out to the stables about once a week. Big Cadillac. Marty always drops everything to talk to him. They go out behind the stable a few minutes. Then he leaves."

"You ever hear a name?"

"Yeah. He got a phone call one time on the stable phone. I heard the guy who answered the phone call him Paddy Burke."

On the drive back into Boston, Michael called Mr. Devlin. He filled him in on the events of the day and asked if he'd ever heard of a Paddy Burke. I heard Mr. Devlin make a low, slow whistle.

"We're into the big time, gentlemen. Paddy Burke is a lieutenant, a capo, whatever the Irish equivalent is, of one Seamus Doyle. Mr. Doyle is one of those people who never seem to go to jail, but any kid in South Boston can tell you he's the big shot in the Irish Mafia. It gets worse. Rumor, for what it's worth, has it that he's connected with the worst element of the IRA. They say he's into fundraising for munitions. This is not someone to take lightly."

Mr. Devlin was right about the Irish Mafia part. I'd been hearing the name Seamus Doyle for years around Southie. I'd never had the pleasure of meeting him, nor wanted it.

By the next day, I had the skeleton of an idea. While Michael and Mr. Devlin handled the legal moves, I figured that I'd tend to the personal side. It started with a visit to Mr. Fitz.

When he walked into the visiting room at the lockup, I



thought I was looking at his father. He'd aged about a generation. I think it brightened him a little to see someone from the stable.

I spent the first ten minutes bringing him up to date on what we knew so far. He seemed pleased to hear that there was a team out there that believed in his innocence. It was counterbalanced by the shock of knowing that he was betrayed by a man he'd trust with his life, Marty Trait.

The real setback was when I told him that Marty had gone over to the camp of Seamus Doyle. In a way, though, it put fire back in the furnace. He seemed willing to give in to defeat until I mentioned Doyle's name. The despair was consumed by anger and the will to fight back.

"Doyle has been after my stable of horses, Billy. We started this losing streak about four months ago. It got so bad that I had to borrow money to keep it going. The banks aren't interested in a racing stable as collateral. I finally went to Doyle. I thought we'd pull out of it and I could pay him back, but it just got deeper. He started a couple of months ago offering to buy me out and cancel the debt. The amount he was offering was a joke, but the more races we lost, the less the stable was worth. I still had a little cushion, but that last race ate it up."

That was the moment I decided to lay out my idea. In any other state of mind, he'd never have gone for it. I explained it as well as I had it thought out at that point.

Mr. Fitz's jaw was set, his back was rigid straight, and he was back in his own generation when he said, "Billy, do whatever you think is right. You'll have my backing."

I got up to leave fast before he had a second to think of what I'd be doing. It wasn't fast enough. I was nearly to the door when he called, "Billy, wait. I can't let you do it. You don't know who you're dealing with. They could hurt you worse than you think."

I came back to the table. "I've thought of all that, Mr. Fitz. I'll stay out of danger. I guarantee it. The course is set now. And it's the right course. We can't go backward."

That held him long enough for me to reach the door. I was through it before I could look back into those moist eyes that were filled with more conflicting emotions than he could handle.

The next stop was the one that counted. I, and everyone else in South Boston, knew that Seamus Doyle held court in a tavern that he owned on D Street called The Shamrock, wouldn't you know?

It was eleven o'clock in the morning when I walked through the door. A few of the town's early drinkers were decorating the bar. The other five spread around the tables were sober, old-country Irish, and large. From this jockey's point of view, they were enormous. I decided not to fight my way in.

I walked up to the one who seemed to have the most intelligence, which did not necessarily make him a candidate for Mensa, and announced that I was there to see himself.

"And would he be expectin' ya?"

"I doubt it. Tell him two things. I've come from Mr. Fitzroy, and I'm here to make his day."

I heard a laugh from the inner sanctum, and a minute later I was ushered in. The man behind the desk was not what I expected. He was not fat and dressed in Irish wools and chewing a cigar. He was in fact lean and athletic-looking. His suit was fine Italian wool, and there was not a trace of smoke in the room. His facial features could be considered handsome when at rest with a smile, but I had a sense that they could snap into the look of a stalking wolf in an instant of displeasure.

"Mr. Doyle, my name's O'Casey."

"I know it is. Billy O'Casey. You've got good hands, Billy. I've seen you ride."

I figured we could hang out swapping compliments or I could get to the point.

"I've got a message from Mr. Fitzroy. He wants to deal."

"Ah, you've seen Fitz. How is he?"

I looked around at the three figures standing against the wall behind me. They seemed a cut above the five outside in terms of the gift of brains, but again, any one of them was big enough to eat me for lunch. I looked back at Doyle.

"Don't let the boys bother you. They know my business." He looked over my shoulder. "Boys, relax. Listen and see how business is done. Now, Billy. Tell me about Fitz."

"He's curious. He wants to know if you have enough sporting blood to make one last deal."

Doyle grinned and looked over to the three "boys." It was just what I'd hoped for. He was playing to an audience.

"What deal is that, Billy?"

"All or nothing. He has Trumpeter Swan entered in the Fox Handicap at Suffolk in two days. He'll put it all on the line. If Swan loses, the stable's yours. If he wins, all debts are canceled. That's it."

Doyle eased back in his chair. The grin on his face spread till it

lit up his eyes. He was savoring the sure thing that had just dropped into his lap and playing the big shot for the three musketeers behind me. I let him have his fun. We both knew he'd snap it up as soon as he heard it, so I could wait.

"Sporting blood, is it, Billy O'Casey? There's never been a lack of it in this body."

He leaned over the desk with his hand extended. I shook hands with the devil and made a mental note to wash with Lysol. I knew he couldn't go back on the deal because he had grandstanded in front of his men.

As I headed out the door, Doyle said, "Billy."

I turned around.

"Like I said, you can ride. Maybe someday you'll be riding for me."

I smiled back and winked at him. "When pigs fly, Mr. Doyle."

The afternoon before the Fox Handicap, I got back home from the track about six P.M. There was a message on my phone recorder from Manny. In a sheepish voice, he told me that Marty had given the order to give Trumpeter Swan a heavy gallop at two in the morning.

Manny left a number. I called back and told him to follow the order. Do it just like I told him. Then clean him up well before putting him back in the stall.

At quarter of two that morning, I was standing in the dark beside the outside rail of the first turn. There was just enough light from the outlying buildings to make out figures. I saw Manny ride the big black colt onto the track. He warmed him up and then put him to a gallop that would have worn out Secretariat. He walked him a lap around the track and took him back to the stables.

During the gallop, I could just make out a faint glint of light high up in the grandstand. My guess was that it was the reflection off of binoculars in the hands of Marty Trait. He wanted to be sure that Manny carried out his orders, but the last thing he wanted was to be seen supervising it.

**B**y post time for the Fox Handicap the track was lightning fast. With Bobby out, I was up on Trumpeter Swan. Marty had given me instructions during the saddle-up, but it didn't matter. This was between Swan and me.

When the starter's bell rang and that gate banged open, I gave

him his head. He sprang like a pent-up lightning bolt. The horses on either side of him challenged for the first lead, but he would not be denied. We took the rail at the head of the pack going into the first turn. I could feel every muscle driving to set more and more distance between him and the followers. I checked him back slightly with pressure on the bit, not enough to break the momentum, just enough to save something for the distance.

I whispered into the ear that flicked back as if to get the signal. "Not yet, Swan. We'll get 'em. Just cruise."

Around the turn and through the back stretch he held the lead against the challenges of horses that would usually be front-runners. He settled into a steady rhythm that ate up distance at a rate that took my breath away.

We went into the far turn a half-length ahead, but I could sense the challenge of the late closers that were coming fast around the outside. I leaned low and close to that flicking ear and gave him the word I think he wanted to hear. "Now, Swan. Show 'em what you got."

I could feel those pulsing muscles strain with a new wellspring of power. His ears were straight back now. Playtime was over. The burst of speed around the turn carried him to the center of the track, but it didn't matter. He owned every inch of the distance that lay ahead of him.

He came off the turn three lengths ahead and the lead kept growing. I could just sense Marty in the stands waiting for the exhaustion of the night gallop to bring him down. He must have been close to panic, because the Swan just kept bringing it on. Seventy yards to go and the lead was up to six lengths and climbing.

When we crossed the finish line, I couldn't even hear the horses behind me. I stood straight up in the irons and yelled my lungs out. The Swan sensed the victory and eased off slightly, but he covered another half mile before he slowed to a canter.

We were both panting when we rode into the winner's circle. I waved my whip to the empty box where Mr. Fitz should have been and prayed that he could feel some of this moment.

We stood as still as the Swan could for the picture. He pranced in place like he wanted to do it all over again.

There was no Marty in the winner's circle to meet us. I saw Michael working his way through the crowd to the rail. He yelled up to me, "Meet us at the outside gate as soon as you can."

I waved back to him and jumped off Swan. I took the saddle and went through the required weighing out at double speed. This was my last race for the day, so I could leave the jockeys' area.

I ran to the front entrance gate of the track. There was a small cluster of people off to the side. Michael had passed on everything we knew to Pat O'Connor and asked him to meet us there. Michael was with them, as was Marty Trait in handcuffs, standing beside a police officer.

Mr. O'Connor saw me and said, "We found your friend here leaving early. I wonder why."

I walked up next to Marty so I could look him eye to eye, with a good bit of head-tilting on my part. I could feel the heat seething out of his pores.

"How about that Swan, Marty? You must be thrilled. Or maybe just shocked after his midnight gallop."

Marty just glared. He looked like he could spit nails, but he didn't trust himself to open his mouth. I answered the question that must have been eating him up.

"Actually there was no midnight gallop. Not for Swan anyway. That was Fair Dawn you saw Manny working this morning. I figured you couldn't tell the difference in the dark."

That did nothing to cool his anger. Michael stepped in.

"No comment, Mr. Trait? Well, that's all right. That's just race fixing. That's peanuts compared to planting evidence of the murder of Bobby Pastore on Mr. Fitzroy."

That brought his head around. I couldn't resist.

"But you blew it, Marty. You planted the wrong strap. You never knew that Bobby rode ace-deuce. That means if Mr. Fitz didn't cut that strap, it had to be you. Only four people had a chance to do it after Bobby's previous race. Mr. Fitz, you, Bobby, and his valet. No one's pointing fingers at the valet, and I don't think Bobby did it."

That bit of logic got absolutely nothing but glares out of Marty. I could see he was digging in. I decided to fire my last best shot.

"You made that anonymous call to the D.A., didn't you, Marty? Only you twisted the facts. Bobby wasn't blackmailing Mr. Fitz. I figure he was squeezing hush money out of the one who had him fixing races. That was you, Marty. You couldn't let the word get out until Mr. Fitz lost the stable. That'd spoil the plan of the one who was pulling your strings. Bobby, the poor sap, didn't know he was playing with Seamus Doyle."

That did it. He went rigid when I mentioned Doyle's name. The arrogance and anger turned to something that looked like terror. I knew then that we had the can opener. Michael did the follow-up.

"If you confess now, Trait, you might get a deal from the D.A. for less than the death penalty for giving up Doyle."

I could see the thought of crossing Seamus Doyle nearly put him in a box. He was still tight as a clam. I had an idea. I asked Michael and Mr. O'Connor to let me have a word with Marty alone. They all stepped off to the side.

"I'll be seeing Seamus Doyle tonight, Marty. We have some business to finish. My guess is he'll be wondering what went wrong. He could be curious about how you let Trumpeter Swan win that race. It cost him the whole Fitzroy stable and a bundle of money besides. It could put him out of sorts. And it wouldn't be hard to drop the suggestion that you double-crossed him."

It could have been a mistake for me to talk to him alone. He could look down on the top of my head, and it gave him enough confidence to get arrogant. He whispered words that came out like venom.

"It'll be a cold day in hell when a little punk like you does business with Seamus Doyle. You're all bluff, you little bum."

I stepped in close to him and dropped my voice.

"You ever been in Seamus Doyle's office, Marty?"

He looked a little blank, but he recovered. "Yeah, I have, but you haven't."

I dropped my voice another notch. "Don't you love that picture behind his desk?"

He had a protective grin on now and was right in my face. "Nice try, kid. I'm calling your bluff. What's in the picture?"

I just stood there for seven or eight seconds while his grin grew into a smirk. "I knew it, you little bum. You can't bluff a bluffer. I'll tell you something. You're dead."

I eased up next to his ear and whispered, "It's a picture of John L. Sullivan. Full body in trunks, bare-fisted. The inscription reads, 'John L. Sullivan. Heavyweight Champ. September 23, 1910.' "

I watched the smirk fall away in stages that went from shock to terror.

"I'll paint you a picture, Marty. The D.A.'s got plenty to indict you. There's no bail for murder one. You'll be sitting in a cell looking at every other prisoner wondering which one was sent by Seamus Doyle."

If sweat is any indication of what's going on inside, Marty was a volcano about to erupt. I gave him one last nudge.

"I'd love to continue this chat, Marty, but I've got an appointment with Doyle. You know how he is when you're late."

I headed back to the jockeys' room for an overdue shower. By the time I made it to the door, I heard Marty pleading for protective custody with a promise to rat on everyone from Seamus Doyle to Walt Disney.

**T**he day after Mr. Fitz was released, he sent for me. I heard from Mike that Mr. Devlin had told him, probably in exaggerated terms, what I had done.

When I walked into Mr. Fitz's office, the first thing that caught my eye was a framed blow-up of a news picture that occupied the whole space behind his desk. One of the newsies had snapped a shot just after we crossed the finish line. There was the Swan, driving like he could run the whole race again. And there I am, straight up in the irons, whip hand in the air, mouth open like a screaming idiot.

He waved me in and came around the desk to meet me. We both stood there staring at that enormous print. I think we were both trying to take in all that it meant to us.

Mr. Fitz started to speak. I could feel a speech coming, but something in his throat seemed to choke it off. I started to tell him that nothing I could ever do for him would bring us even, but that throat problem was contagious. So we both just stood there drinking all the good thoughts that were leaping off of that picture—for a long time. 🐦

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# UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING



**"I** hated to interrupt your Florida vacation," began Captain Chapman of the NYPD, "especially in this sub-zero weather—"

"But you did," snapped Detective Vince Bartoli, drawing a cup of hot coffee from the office urn. "Why?"

"Because we need to head off further gang warfare between the Silver Skulls and the Sicilian Brotherhood. Last night old Arturo Scanatelli, head of the Skulls, was murdered in his mansion out on Long Island."

"Not unexpected," Bartoli commented. "Those two gangs have been invading each other's turf for months. What's the progress on the case?"

"We have no direct evidence. No fingerprints, and there was no snow to record footprints. We rounded up five leaders of the Brotherhood—Kalyvas, Lambroso, Mitelli, Nicoli, and Orosco. They cooperated and gave straight answers to our questions, except, of course, any dealing with the murder. On those, on the advice of their lawyers, they pled the Fifth Amendment."

"What do you know about them?" Bartoli asked impatiently.

"Their ages range from twenty-four to twenty-eight. Like the victim, they all immigrated from Sicily: from Catania, Cefalu, Messina, Palermo, and Siracusa. Frankly, Vince, it looks like a Sicilian feud transplanted to America. Since you speak Italian, I'm hoping you can get more out of them."

"Any witnesses?"

"Two neighbors claim to have seen a man in a brown apalca overcoat run from the mansion and jump into a waiting Buick, which sped away immediately."

"So, two were involved. What did you learn in the interviews?"

"Not much," the captain admitted. He outlined what he knew so far:

1. The man wearing the black raincoat is one year younger than Joe.
2. The man who came from Palermo is twenty-five years old; Mr. Lambroso is either one year older or one year younger.

3. The man from Messina, who drives a Chevrolet, is one year older than Gus, who was born in Cefalu.
4. Fred Nicoli is the oldest of the five.
5. Man born in Siracusa wears the pea jacket.
6. Mr. Kalyvas, who wears the trenchcoat, is one year older than the driver of the Audi, who wears the brown alpaca overcoat.
7. Mr. Orosco is one year older than the driver of the Ford.
8. Hal wears the parka.
9. Ike drives a Dodge.

"There's no need for me to interview them," Detective Bartoli said. "If the witnesses are correct, I know the guilty pair."

*Who was the killer in the brown alpaca overcoat?  
Who drove the getaway car?*

### **Solution to the December "Dying Words"**

#### **WORD LIST**

A. Discovery  
B. Originate  
C. Nickname  
D. Hovercraft  
E. Emcees  
F. Rousseau  
G. Radiator

H. Osteopath  
I. Nuthatch  
J. Bum steer  
K. Ownership  
L. Off the cuff  
M. Key Largo  
N. Emmenthaler  
O. Detritus  
P. Auntie Mame

Q. Northwest  
R. Denies  
S. Powder keg  
T. Rumor mill  
U. Ivy League  
V. Nottingham  
W. Tidies  
X. Effectuate  
Y. Dismissed

#### **QUOTATION**

Author—DON HERRON

Work—"BOOKED AND PRINTED" from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, February 2003

"From the moment when . . . Poe imagined murder victims found . . . in the Rue Morgue . . . the mean streets of cities have served as a perfect arena for crime writers. Sure, most of us know you could get killed . . . anytime . . . but it is hard to shake the feeling that a city . . . is a . . . dangerous place."

# THE MAIDSERVANT'S LETTER

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GIGI VERNON

**P**ARIS, APRIL 2, 1741

"You're Monsieur de l'Amour?" the young maidservant asked uncertainly, stepping up to the small, flimsy table that served as his desk.

At his usual spot in the covered, arched passageway among the other hawkers of goods and services, Vincent nodded and smiled encouragingly.

She pulled a sheet of paper out of her apron pocket and handed it to him.

Vincent nodded, inspecting her over the top of his spectacles. Illiterate servants were his best customers and droves of them sought out his stall for his professional letter-writing and reading services. For a small fee, he kept them linked to family and lovers in the provinces. His advice and comfort he gave for free.

"Please. I'd like a letter read to me," the girl said.

He hadn't seen this particular maidservant before. She was prettily slender with small, sharp features set off by dark curls under a white, lace-edged cap. He had an uncanny memory for faces, even those he'd only glimpsed. What else had he to do now, spending his days and nights among the living and the dead in the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents?

The most popular in Paris, the cemetery was half a dozen city blocks wide and long, enclosed on all sides by tall houses perched atop arched passageways. A city within a city. On this sunny April day, the brisk wind made the faint odor of decay from the graves hardly noticeable to the residents, merchants, shoppers, and mourners who were going about their daily business.

As he did dozens of times a day, Vincent glanced across the cemetery beyond the spire of the Chapel of the Virgin toward the tomb of his fifteen-year-old daughter, and drew strength from her presence. He touched the crucifix he wore around his neck.

"Monsieur?" The girl recalled him to the present.

He turned brisk and efficient. "You have a letter you want me to read?"

"Yes, monsieur. A love letter," she said with a bold, saucy glint in her dark eyes, as she pushed the letter toward him across his desk's rough wood.

He took the letter, untied the blue ribbon around it, and asked, "You haven't come to me before, have you?"

"No, monsieur. You were recommended to me by a friend," she replied, her gaze steady under his scrutiny.

"Oh yes? Who would that be?" he asked, always pleased to hear about recommendations.

"Catherine?" she said uncertainly.

"Catherine Pousse?"

She nodded.

"Delightful girl." He smiled with approval.

"She said you were the very best at reading and writing love letters. That's why you're known as Vincent de l'Amour. If she hadn't said you were the best, I would never have come here." She put a cheap bunch of wilted violets to her nose. "I don't care for cemeteries myself."

"No doubt that is because you haven't known tragedy yet," he said kindly.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, with a mixture of suspicion and pity, as if she thought he might be senile. Though Vincent's hair and mustache may have been streaked with gray and his face etched with lines, his heart and soul were still young, younger than this girl whose scorn thinly disguised her fears.

A nearby funeral party fought the eddies of swirling dust kicked up by the gusts of wind, the priest bellowing his prayer at the grave's edge, the men holding onto their black tricorne, and the women clutching their long black veils as they wept loudly.

Turning back to the girl, Vincent gave her a reassuring smile. "Let me see what you have here."

The seal of the letter had already been broken. With a glance at the seal's red wax imprinted with the image of a bird, he unfolded the letter. The blue paper was heavy and expensive, with a lustrous sheen to it. The young man must be wealthy and educated.

Vincent hoped for the girl's sake he was also of a good character, but he frowned when he saw that the note was addressed and signed with mere initials. Certain signs of a clandestine romance. He sighed with disapproval. But then, what did it really matter? The only thing that really mattered was life. And love.

He began to read aloud.

March 6, 1741

Dearest M.,

"M.? That's you?" he asked, peering at the girl.

"Yes," she said with a shrug and a frown as if she couldn't understand why he was asking such an obvious question.

He continued reading:

*Every day that I am away from you seems an eternity, every hour a century. I long to see you. I have been able to think of nothing else since our conversation the other day. Your wish is my command.*

N.

Vincent looked up from the letter, and smiled at the girl's happiness. Her features had softened with a faraway smile, and her brown eyes were alight with hope and dreams.

"Would you like me to read it again?" he asked gently.

"Will it cost more?" she asked.

"Of course not."

"Yes, then, if you please." She closed her eyes to listen better.

He began again at the beginning, and read slowly with feeling. Afterwards, he asked, "Would you like me to write a response?"

She opened her eyes, and for a moment he read joy there before her eyes widened with sudden fear at the sight of something behind him. A shadow fell across his desk, and he turned to see his friend, Monsieur Radnor, under-inspector of the Paris police. Tall and muscular with the upright posture of an ex-soldier, Radnor regarded them with arms crossed, unsmiling, black tricorn pulled low over his black eyes.

"Never mind. I have to go," she said, her glance darting nervously to Radnor, as she snatched the letter from Vincent's hand. "How much do I owe you, monsieur?"

"Two sous."

She hurriedly dug the coins out of a pocket in her skirt, and dropped them on the table. "*Mouche!*" she said under her breath to Vincent in warning as she fled.

Fly, she'd called Radnor. Slang for the police who some consid-

ered to be no more than spies listening for words of treason against the king.

Impervious to the insult, Radnor watched the girl hurry away. "She's lying," he said in his low, slightly raspy drawl.

"You think everyone's lying," Vincent snapped. "She was simply frightened by you. And no wonder. You look like an undertaker or a Huguenot minister in all that black." As usual, Radnor was in severe black from head to toe—a black tricorn over black hair pulled into a neat queue, a spotless black coat, waistcoat, breeches and stockings, black gloves to disguise the absence of the tip of the middle finger on the left hand, and polished black shoes with paste buckles. Only the snowy white of his cravat and shirt at the neck and wrists relieved the black. "You've frightened all my other customers away too," Vincent complained, standing up.

Radnor tossed a bright silver coin on the table. "I'll buy you a good meal to make up for it."

Vincent eyed the coin, undecided. An ecu would buy a very fine meal indeed, but then Radnor would expect information in return. He considered the coin as he began to close up, the work of only a few moments, requiring him to wipe the ink from his quills, cork the bottle of ink, put pens, sand, ink, and paper into the cheap wooden box he used to store his writing implements.

Observing him without offering to help, Radnor continued in his drawl, "I'm an under-inspector for the Paris police. People should fear me. Especially criminals like that young woman."

"She's in love. Surely His Majesty Louis XV hasn't made love a crime. Yet."

"She's not in love," Radnor said.

Vincent snapped the box shut and slipped it under his arm. "Why don't you wear something more cheerful? A young man like yourself. How do you hope to find a wife?" He suspected it was an affectation on Radnor's part, intended to be striking and attract attention. Feminine attention.

Radnor smiled humorlessly, but said nothing.

Vincent could imagine the effect the rare flash of white teeth from Radnor had on impressionable girls of easy virtue. He'd lectured Radnor on such matters before. "How do you know she's lying?" he asked.

"I've seen her before. She's a maid at the residence of a certain Monsieur du Sonton who reported the theft of his wife's necklace and earrings last week."



"You think this girl had something to do with it? She seems honest enough to me."

Radnor rolled his eyes. "Not everyone in Paris is as honest and good-hearted as you are, old man."

"Nor is everyone as corrupt and cynical as you," Vincent quipped as he pocketed the coin. His box under his arm, he picked up the portable table and his stool and headed for the entrance of the house above and behind him. He opened the door, then climbed the stairs to his apartment on the top floor.

Without being invited, Radnor followed, still not offering to help. "That letter was no doubt sent to the maid's mistress, *Marie du Sonton*. She filched it and intends to use it to blackmail her mistress. The oldest game in the world."

Vincent stopped in the narrow, dim stairwell, and turned to face his friend. "You're too young to be so certain of everyone's guilt," he reprimanded.

"Though I suspect that you led a sheltered life before you became known as *Monsieur de l'Amour*, you're too old to be so gullible," Radnor shot back.

"Have some faith in humanity."

"You will find that your faith in the humanity of Paris is misplaced."

"Not in this case. I'm sure of it."

With a melodramatic snorting, Radnor asked, "Where would you like to dine?"

**W**atching Vincent turn toward home and the cemetery after the meal, not for the first time, Radnor thought his friend would make a good priest. Poor deluded Vincent and his misguided attempts to befriend those who were hopelessly lost. Radnor's fondness for the older man, a fondness he did not quite understand himself, made him worry about Vincent's blindness to the dangerous and sordid world of Parisian crime. The truth behind the maidservant and her letter would edify him.

Radnor's instincts told him the maidservant was somehow connected to the theft, and he always listened to his instincts when a generous reward for the return of stolen goods was at stake. He sought out the informer he'd assigned to the *Hôtel du Sonton*. The man's name was Pierre Abiter, but in his mind, Radnor called the man "the Sniveler," for he was constantly wiping his running nose and dabbing at his watery eyes.

The Sniveler was a felon paroled from the Bastille on the condition

that he turn informer for the police. Though he had wanted to retire from housebreaking, he had been reluctant at first to turn informer. He'd settled into his new profession surprisingly well, however, and now was one of Radnor's best and most reliable men.

Each day, the Sniveler made his reports to Radnor at the same time at the same tavern. Radnor found him at a table by himself in a corner, surrounded by used, wadded-up rags. Radnor ordered a jar of wine for the two of them.

"Anything to report?" Radnor asked, after they'd been served.

"An inside job for certain. My money's on the housekeeper."

"Any chance she had an accomplice?"

"No doubt." The big fireplace suddenly belched smoke into the room, causing the Sniveler to cough and blink rapidly as he dabbed at his reddened eyes.

Radnor described the maid. "Know the woman?"

"Sounds like Marie Lasourde. One of the upstairs maids. A real slut, they say."

So her name was Marie like her mistress. That didn't prove anything. "Does she have a lover?" Radnor asked.

The man sneezed and gave his nose a resounding trumpeting blow. When he was finished, he said, "Several, according to the other servants."

"Anyone new? A wealthy man?"

The Sniveler nodded with enthusiasm. "So they say."

Radnor inhaled sharply with surprise. He'd been certain the woman was lying. "His name?"

"Don't know, monsieur. But I can find out. One of the other maids is sure to know."

"Do so then. And be quick about it," Radnor said, annoyed at the prospect that he'd been mistaken about the maid and Vincent correct. He dropped a coin on the table between them and stood up, before remembering to ask, "How about Madame du Sonton? Has she a lover?"

"If she has, she's kept it secret well. None of her household suspects a thing. But then she'd have to be especially good at lying to cheat her husband. He's a jealous man. Very jealous. Hardly lets her out of his sight."

Unwilling to give up his initial theory, Radnor instructed, "See what more you can discover about Madame."

Cynicism was a coward's approach to life, death, and love, and Vincent decided Radnor was in need of a lesson. He would prove

Radnor wrong. He would find the maidservant and learn the truth. But first, he would pay a visit to Catherine Pousse at the laundry where she worked to ask her about her friend.

Catherine stood in the doorway of the large establishment, steam billowing out into the street from behind her, wiping her wet, red hands on her dirty apron, and pushing her damp hair from her face.

She was one of his favorite customers. A bouncy young woman with a fresh round face and a ready smile, honest, spotlessly clean, though always slightly disheveled and moist. Pleased to see him, she gave him a peck on the cheek in greeting as if he had been her father. He asked after her well-being, then described the maidservant who'd come to see him.

"I don't know anyone like that, Monsieur de l'Amour. You sure it was my name she mentioned?"

"Yes," Vincent said with a sinking feeling. "You're certain you don't know her?"

"Yes," she said nodding. She smiled at him, and apologized, "I've got to get back to work now, monsieur. I'll stop by for another letter to my mother soon."

Disappointed to find that the maidservant had lied to him, Vincent turned towards the Hôtel du Sonton. Was it as Radnor suggested? Was she involved in something illegal? Poor girl. Another one who had lost her way. That's what happened to young people when they came from the provinces to Paris and were set adrift without guidance from parents or priests in the most corrupt city in the world. The lucky ones found him, and he willingly guided them, serving as a father to them. The unlucky ones found themselves in Radnor's clutches, or worse.

That evening, the Sniveler appeared at Radnor's apartment.

Angrily, Radnor pulled the man inside. "What are you doing here? I told you never to come here. If it's known you inform for me, you'll be no good to me."

"Sorry, Monsieur Radnor," the Sniveler said as he pulled his hat from his head, "but I thought you'd want to know that Marie Lasourde has disappeared."

"How do you mean *disappeared*? Has she left town or been kidnapped?"

"Don't know, monsieur. No one knows where she went. The other maid who shares a chamber with her says her things are gone."

"All of them?"

"She left her gowns."

She couldn't very well have made a discreet escape lugging a bundle. Perhaps she didn't need the gowns if she intended to live off the fortune that the necklace and earrings would bring. "What did she take?"

"Personal trinkets. Ribbons, a locket, letters."

"Was she wearing her favorite gown by any chance?"

The Sniveler looked at him blankly. "Don't know, monsieur."

Disappearing in a favorite gown was a sure sign of flight rather than kidnapping. Every informer knew that. "Well, find out!" Radnor ordered, irritated by the man's ignorance.

Radnor's instincts had steered him true once again. He'd unearthed crime. Either blackmail or theft or perhaps both. Most likely the maidservant had taken flight the moment she suspected they were onto her. When they found her, they might even find the stolen jewels, and then he'd make a tidy sum to add to his savings. A few more lucrative cases like this one and he'd be able to purchase the more respectable office of inspector which he had held until the new, reforming head of the Paris Police had taken over a year ago.

The next morning, Radnor was awakened by a messenger sent by the Sniveler. A skinny, twelve year old recited to him: Marie Lasourde had been wearing her favorite gown when she'd disappeared. And she was sweet on Nicholas Keplin, the son of a successful chandler.

Nicholas—N. Just as he had suspected.

Radnor dressed carefully before setting out for the Keplin shop. He gave a quick brush to his coat, shoes, and tricorne, and tied and retied his cravat several times before he was satisfied with the knot, then smoothed his hair in its queue.

The Keplin shop was small and narrow, nestled in among the other shops on the fashionable and expensive Rue St. Honoré, around the corner from the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents.

At the bell that rang upon Radnor's entrance, a man came out of a curtained back room. Obviously expecting to see his usual kind of customer, the servant of a rich aristocrat, the man hesitated in confusion when he saw Radnor. "May I help you?"

Just as skeptical, Radnor eyed the pale, balding man. Marie Lasourde was obviously one of those women for whom security meant everything. "Are you Nicholas Keplin?" Radnor asked, glancing at the shelves full of candles, candle holders, lamps, and wall sconces.

"Nicholas is my son, but no doubt I can help you. We sell the

finest candles in all of Paris here," the man said out of habit, his eyes and voice still uncertain of Radnor.

"I'm not here to buy anything, Monsieur Keplin. I merely want a few words with your son. Can you tell me where I can find him?"

"What business do you have with him?" the shopkeeper asked, becoming openly suspicious.

"That's my affair."

"He's not in town at the moment. He's away on business."

Radnor wondered whether the father was somehow involved. On closer inspection, however, the man seemed not so much guilty as confused. "Maybe you can tell me if your son has ever mentioned a young woman by the name of Marie Lasourde?"

The man's face instantly reddened with rage, and he nearly spluttered as he asked, "Is that the name of the harlot who's seduced him?"

"Then he does know her?"

"To my shame and disgrace. She's a strumpet. Willful and indecent. What does he see in her? I've forbidden him to speak to her. He was such a good boy before he met her. He'll marry the girl I've chosen. Marrying for love! Ridiculous idea!" Keplin fished in his waistcoat pocket and produced a lace handkerchief with which he mopped his perspiring forehead. "Is that what this is about? I knew it." He squinted at Radnor. "Are you a relation to this Lasourde creature?"

"Hardly," Radnor answered dryly. "I'm an under-inspector for the police and I believe this woman and your son may have fled the city with stolen jewels. Anything you can tell me about his whereabouts will help."

The red of the man's face deepened, becoming an ugly purple. He gasped, gripping his chest as he slumped to the floor, pulling candles off the shelf with groping hands. An apoplexy. Radnor strode to the curtained-off back room where he found apprentices to help.

After they'd helped the gasping man upstairs to his apartment, Radnor asked one of the young men if he knew where Nicholas Keplin was. "Toulouse, I think, monsieur."

"*Merde*," Radnor cursed under his breath. That meant contacting the Marshalsea of Toulouse for help, which meant that the reward for the recovery of the stolen jewels would slip out of his fingers into theirs. "*Merde*," he repeated.

The more Vincent thought about the girl's lie the more his sense

of paternal duty toward her strengthened. He hurried to the Hôtel du Sonton where he intended to steer the girl away from the evils of mendacity and back onto the path of virtue. A footman at the servants' entrance in the back informed him that Marie Lasourde no longer worked at the hotel. When he asked for an explanation, the man shrugged his shoulders, and said he didn't know anything more.

Distressed by the girl's fate, Vincent walked slowly toward the front of the house. As he was about to turn into the cobblestoned courtyard and head toward the street, he narrowly avoided being run down by a carriage. The carriage, painted an ostentatious shiny green, clattered to a stop in front of the granite steps of the impressive entrance to the hotel. Still thinking about Marie Lasourde, Vincent watched absentmindedly as liveried footmen rushed out of the hotel to open the carriage door and pull down its step.

First a dainty stockinged foot in a white high-heeled slipper with a blue bow on it emerged, then the rest of the carriage's occupant—a powdered and painted woman cloaked in red velvet. Madame du Sonton no doubt. In a tall, powdered wig that required attention to her balance, she carefully climbed the entrance steps and disappeared inside. The front door clicked shut.

He studied the pale yellow brick facade of the hotel which was tall, wide, and many-windowed, before his eye was drawn to the green carriage again. He noticed its door was painted with a coat of arms—a swan flanked by stars, branches, and such. It seemed somehow familiar. And then it came to him. The wax seal of Marie Lasourde's love letter had been sealed with a similar emblem, too similar to be a coincidence.

Avoiding the steaming horse dung on the cobblestones, he trotted over to the coachman about to drive the vehicle away, and asked, "Pardon, monsieur, is this the du Sonton coach?"

The coachman surveyed him from deep-socketed black eyes under bushy, black eyebrows, as he considered Vincent and his question, then he jerked his head in assent once.

"And was that Madame du Sonton herself I saw just now?"

Another jerk of the head. The nods must have loosened the man's tongue. "Back from her country estate," he said through thick wet lips.

Vincent tipped his tricorne to the man and walked toward the street.

So the wax, the seal, and no doubt the paper had come from the du Sonton household. Marie Lasourde, or her beau, had obtained stationery from the house. That wouldn't do. Marie lying and

stealing for the man, then most likely losing her position over it? Or had it been Marie's beau who obtained the stationery? Did he in fact live in the house? It made no sense. Why would the young man write to his sweetheart who could not read if they saw each other frequently? Vincent would find Radnor and tell him of his discovery. Radnor would discover the truth.

**R**adnor thanked Vincent for the information with a coin, then sent his friend away with the promise that he'd tell him how it turned out.

If the letter had not been sent by Nicholas Keplin after all, but by someone in the house, or who had access to the house, then Radnor had work to do. He returned to his original theory. It was far more likely that the M. of the letter was Madame Marie du Sonton herself.

As a rule, Radnor avoided doing any investigating himself, relying on his informers. But sometimes he had no choice. This was just such an occasion.

Upon his arrival at the Hôtel du Sonton, he asked for Madame. Instead he was shown to the office of the housekeeper, a small closet of a room furnished with a desk stacked with papers and ledgers, and two hard wooden chairs.

"Madame Vries will be with you in a moment," the footman told him. "You're to wait."

Radnor glanced at the papers on the desk. Receipts and tradesmen's bills. With a glance at the door, he opened a desk drawer. Quills and ink in the first. The next drawer held stationery, sticks of sealing wax, and a seal. The stationery was the same pale blue of the letter Marie Lasourde had brought to Vincent. Hearing the click of heels approaching along the marble tiles of the corridor outside, he quickly closed the drawer and stepped away from the desk.

The door opened, and the housekeeper entered. She was a statuesque blonde, young and attractive to be a housekeeper, though one look at her hard eyes and strong, capable hands suggested how she had risen to such a position. She took a seat at her desk across from him. She did not invite him to sit.

"What do you want with Madame?" she asked. She had a long, sinewy neck in which Radnor could see the faint pulsing of a vein.

He sat anyway. "I'd like to ask her a few questions in connection with the theft of her necklace and earrings."

"Madame's busy. Ask me," she said, her lips curling slightly with scorn, completely unimpressed by him.



Usually, women were intrigued by him, and he used their reaction to his advantage. "I have reason to believe that Marie Lasourde might be connected with the theft."

Her eyes turned flinty. "That tart. Good riddance. I sacked her yesterday for returning late from her afternoon off."

Sacked or disappeared? Very convenient, he thought.

"If she's responsible for the theft, I should have sacked her long before. What are you doing to find her?" she ended on an accusing note.

Radnor ignored the accusation. "Do you know where she might have gone or where her family lives?"

"No idea. I've better things to do than keep track of all the maidservants who come and go in this place." She gestured at the account books lying open before her on the desk.

They glared at each other. Radnor was accustomed to unhelpful Parisians, but he sensed a wary defensiveness in her that made him suspicious. As if she had something to hide.

"Now if you'll excuse me." She stood to dismiss him.

He stood too, and said, making no attempt to keep the threat out of his voice, "I really must insist that I see Madame now."

Angry resentfulness flared in her face, but she did not argue. Instead, she stood up and flounced toward the door. Out in the corridor, she flagged a young footman and told him to inform Madame she needed to speak with her urgently. She cuffed the boy on the head when he hesitated. "Move!"

She led Radnor down the corridor to a wide, marble staircase with a gilded, curved banister. On the next floor, the young footman found them and led them to Madame in her antechamber, a dressing room of white and pale green, bright with sunlight pouring through two floor-to-ceiling windows.

Though it was noon, he must have interrupted Madame's *levée*. She sat in a chair having powder and paint applied to her face by two chambermaids. A sheet covered most of a voluminous blue-striped silk gown. Her hair pulled tightly back in preparation for the wig, her face half-powdered and painted, the bare skin still showing pink in spots, she looked monstrous.

When Madame saw the housekeeper with him, she exclaimed, "Nina!" the familiarity apparently slipping out in her surprise.

"My apologies, Madame," the housekeeper curtsied. "Monsieur Radnor of the police is here about the theft."

Madame met the housekeeper's eyes, and the two of them held each other's gazes for a long moment, too long, as a wordless message passed between them. Then Madame looked at him and gave

him a broad, false smile of challenge. She curtly dismissed the two maids.

M. and N. Marie and Nina. The suspicions that had been growing as Radnor talked to the housekeeper took final form. The two were lovers, writing love letters to each other when they were separated. He smiled wryly, not so much with shock at the lewdness—he'd encountered far worse—but at being caught off guard. It was naïveté worthy of his friend Vincent.

"Well?" Madame said, smiling at the understanding she read in his eyes.

"I believe I've discovered the whereabouts of your necklace and earrings. They are nearby." He looked directly at the housekeeper. "And presumably safe."

Defiance burned in Nina's eyes as she moved to Madame's side.

"Very good," Madame said, reaching for the housekeeper's hand, and drawing it to her to hold against the base of her throat.

"Your husband reported the theft because you must have neglected to tell him that you had given the jewels to a loved one."

"They were a wedding gift from him, which made it all the sweeter to give them to another." Madame glanced up at her housekeeper, then raised Nina's hand to her lips, and kissed its palm.

"Yes, well, that is between you and him," Radnor answered, then added, "and her. However, someone has to be held accountable for the crime."

"But it will not be me or Nina," Madame stated with the authority that wealth and nobility gave her. "Blame it on one of the servants," she suggested lightly.

Familiar as he was with injustice and oppression, the casual cold-bloodedness of the solution unsettled him every time.

"Blame it on Marie Lasourde," the housekeeper added. "She deserves to be hanged. For trying to blackmail us. Stupid whore."

"I'll deal with her. I think you might find it easier to maintain cordial relations with your husband if the necklace and earrings were somehow found," Radnor said.

**T**he Cemetery of the Holy Innocents basked in the warm spring sunshine, attracting to its precincts not just the usual mourners, but shoppers browsing and visitors paying their respects at graves.

Vincent de l'Amour had set up his desk in a patch of sunshine and sat hunched over a book, engrossed in his reading while he waited for customers.

How Vincent could be oblivious to the stench of death that saturated the entire area, the tumult, and the babel of chatter, prayers, wails, and weeping was beyond Radnor. Not to mention the insalubriousness of the place confirmed by the Académie des Sciences several years ago when they recommended to the king that the cemetery be relocated outside of the city. No one had paid any attention. Vincent least of all. Parisians preferred their dead at the heart of the living city.

Radnor pulled an empty wooden crate in front of the rough, unsteady table and sat. "You were right. It was love," he announced dryly.

Vincent looked up, his eyes still far away. Blinking in an attempt to focus his thoughts, he asked, "Pardon?"

"Marie Lasourde and her lover Nicholas Keplin."

"I told you so." Vincent's face crinkled into a smile of satisfaction.

"Of course they were attempting to blackmail her employer as I had guessed."

Vincent's relief turned to a worried frown. "Oh dear! I suspected that girl might have fallen into sin. What will happen to them?"

"Who knows? If Keplin senior recovers from his apoplexy, he'll probably disinherit his son. But that's the young lovers' problem. I imagine they'll manage with Marie's criminal talents to support them. At any rate, they've fled Paris and they're out of my jurisdiction."

Vincent's dark eyes turned bleak. "What a shame." He shook his head sadly. "They'll hang for the theft."

"They may hang, but I think not for the theft of the jewels, for they were never stolen. Madame Marie du Sonton gave Nina Vries, her housekeeper and lover, the necklace and earrings in gratitude for her amorous favors and to spite her jealous and controlling husband."

"Oh my!" Vincent's eyes nearly burst out of his head with shock.

His reaction did little to lessen Radnor's chagrin at losing the reward and refusing the bribe. Radnor would have been more gratified at his friend's enlightenment if Vincent weren't so damnably well intentioned and trusting. Radnor smiled without humor. "Still. You were right, old man. It was love." 🐦

# THE CHARGE NOT FILED

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BRUCE GRAHAM

**L**ori Prewitt tapped the bar on the telephone. "Lori here."  
"County Attorney?"

Lori sighed. She knew she sounded tired, at six forty-five at night, eleven hours and two fast food meals after arriving at her office. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

"This is Sergeant Bill McNamara, Worcester Police. Do you have business with a John Ricetti, of our town?"

"He's a witness in one of my cases."

"He was, but he won't be. He was found dead about an hour ago here."

"Say it ain't so."

"Yeah, it is. A knife in the chest, at the bottom of a flight of stairs. The fall didn't hurt him, the stabbing did him in. We found your letter in his pocket. We haven't confirmed his identity by his prints, but all of his ID fits."

"Probably is, then." Lori sagged. The case against Robert Archer had been pending for seven months: bludgeoning two men with a piece of iron in a disagreement over a drug transaction, two counts of aggravated, drug related assault, with a goodly amount of circumstantial evidence, but only one eyewitness, Ricetti, identifying Archer as the attacker. Without Ricetti, the case suddenly became weak.

"That's all I have."

"He's my star witness to put a violent drug dealer away for a lot of years." Lori's mind was working. "Could you hold up on releasing this to the media?"

"No. Policy is it goes out as soon as it comes in. It'll be posted by ten tonight."

"Can you hold back his name, notifying next of kin, confirming identity, anything like that? I have an idea to salvage something out of this."

"Okay," said McNamara. "How about three days?"

"Thursday, at ten P.M.? I'll call you before that. You're four to midnight?"

"Correct. If I don't hear from you, it'll be out Thursday night." He rattled off his telephone number.

"Thanks for calling. Goodbye." She tapped the bar before the dial tone spat back. A fine kettle of fish. Even money that Archer iced Ricetti. If Archer didn't kill him and hears of the murder, her case was nearly hopeless, but she'd have to try it—and kill three days in court. And Archer would be boss of the street more than ever.

She was feeling the pangs of doubt that would be normal in any county attorney only two years out of law school. Her anxiety was aggravated by knowledge that the county governing board had appointed her only because no one else was available on short notice to replace the almost fifteen-year veteran in the post, who had resigned suddenly for health reasons.

And she was further troubled by her dilemma, which she needed to decide within a few weeks—whether to become a candidate for a four-year term in the office, or to abandon the position and jump into private practice, a career path she'd deliberately avoided by accepting the position of assistant county attorney in the first place. The choices didn't look hopeful either way: If she chose to seek election, she'd need to raise the five thousand dollars required for a campaign; if she opted for private practice, she doubted that any office in the area would have her, and she would need a bundle of money to open her own office. She was unfamiliar with the fine points of pursuing elected office, and was well aware that she had no strong backing on the all-male county governing board, two of whom she knew were actively feeling out other lawyers to run against her.

Lori did know that letting a sleazy punk get the better of her on two of the charges would not enhance her chances of winning the confidence of the voters. The case had been sound before and had the makings of good publicity, but now it was all but lost.

She stared at the certificates on the wall alongside her desk: college graduation; law school graduation; bar admissions in two states; appointment as county attorney, term to expire at the end of the year. She felt something welling up within her: the determination not to let Don Lewerke and his no-good client best her and the public she worked for.

A plan was gelling in her mind. It wasn't the sort of scheme that would be found in the books, but it was the best she could come up with. She found her file of eavesdropping warrant requests and

filled in the blanks with as much material from the file—augmented by her conversation with McNamara—as she could. She signed the form and dialed Judge Corwin's number.

His voice was, as ever, solemn, steady, and unruffled. "Hello."

"Judge, Lori Prewitt. May I come over with an eavesdropping warrant request?"

"Sure, if you can make it before my favorite TV program at nine."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

Twenty-six minutes later Lori was watching His Honor give the papers his customary cursory study, with the usual distant gaze that seemed to Lori to mean that he was almost lost with such warrants. Twenty-one minutes after that she was explaining to the sheriff's chief deputy what she wanted in the setting of the bugs in Archer's apartment in the seedy Riverfront section of town. And in another nineteen minutes she was home with her cat.

Lori's third telephone call at a little before eight the following morning confirmed that the bugs had been securely set in Archer's digs while he was at his job overnight.

Her next call was to Archer's lawyer, Don Lewerke, the hotshot who was rapidly acquiring a reputation for being the least cooperative and most arrogant lawyer in four counties. Three years out of Yale, where he was near the top of his class, he had joined the practice of the Graves brothers, who were in their seventies. When they left their practice, feet first, five months apart, Lewerke ran with dozens of files, milking the firm's connections for a bunch more. He was much that Lori was not, haughty and overconfident. A bachelor and a workaholic, Lewerke would be at his office before heading out to court.

"Lewerke here."

"Don, Lori Prewitt."

"Okay, oppressor of the poor and humble, what are you dealing?"

"Are you ready for the Archer case? It's third on the list, and the other two may sugar off."

"Settling everything, are you?"

"Your guy's last chance. I'll ask for the maximum terms."

"My guy isn't inclined to plead."

"He's looking at ten years on each count, and I'll ask for consecutive terms. I'll take pleas to serious assault, two counts, four years on each, consecutive."

Lewerke laughed.

"Run it by him."

"Not before trial. He doesn't respond to my letters."

That was a help. Lori licked her lips, thinking. She said goodbye and dropped the receiver. She worked with other case files, and shortly before nine called Lewerke again.

"I'll send out a warrant for his arrest. That'll make sure he's here for the trial," she told him.

"You can't do that."

She pretended to read from a mythical paper: "Defendant's attorney states defendant does not respond to attempts to contact. Attorney is not able to communicate county attorney's offer of compromise to defendant. On information and belief—"

"Okay, okay, give me today, and I'll see what I can do."

Lori was settling down to her salad at the Golden Corral a little before six that evening when Lewerke strode along the aisle.

"I found him," said Lewerke. "He says to stick it."

Lori began moving greens into her mouth. "Sit down."

"Can't. I'm going back to the office."

"Why is he so blind. Twenty years is tougher than eight. Doesn't he know about the eyewitness?"

"He just won't do it. He thinks he can beat it, and his money's good."

Lori put down her fork and stared at Lewerke. "I'm tired. You have me in a moment of weakness. How about one count, five years? Last chance for him to get out cheap. The victims were drug dealers, they're in no position to complain about easy justice."

"He won't go for it."

"You'll run it by him?"

"Sure. If you'll go for disorderly conduct."

She frowned, giving him her best pretending-to-be-angry scowl. "Last offer. If I have to go through the headaches of dealing with my cast of X-rated witnesses and setting up the case, I'll withdraw all offers and there'll be nothing less than the charges on file. I won't even ask for a jury instruction on lesser-included offenses." She threw her fork into her half-full salad dish and looked past Lewerke at the waitress approaching with her rib-eye. "My main course is coming, and I don't want your crummy client interfering with my appetite."

"Okay, okay," said Lewerke, a hand extended, palm open. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Make it by noon the next day. I have a busy day out of the office tomorrow." She would make it be true by being everywhere but in the office; Lori didn't want to make herself into a liar, should one of the judges grill her on her chicanery and trickery on the Robert Archer case.





Late the next afternoon Lori was in the conference room of the sheriff's office, a store-bought sub sandwich, soda, and bag of chips before her, looking at a pile of tapes and a tape player. Munching away, Lori listened through the first few tapes at high speed of miscellaneous irrelevant sounds, muffled and difficult to understand because the bugs were centered on picking up Archer's end of the telephone conversations. Lori ate her evening meal amid conversations that probably had to do with drug transactions, similar telephone conversations, long patches of silence, and words of affection between Archer and a woman he called Flopsy, mingled with sounds of squeaking bed springs, grunts, and groans.

Later tapes included an argument between Archer and Flopsy over a joint, more telephone calls, and muffled attempts at conversation over meals and otherwise. Then came a telephone call that Lori backed up the tape on, and listened to at regular speed.

Archer: Yeah?

Pause.

Archer: I forgot. It's on for the nineteenth, huh?

Pause. Flopsy in background: I'll work on the joint.

Archer: Yeah, go ahead, it's my lawyer. I ain't worried, they can't prove a thing.

Pause.

Archer: He won't put me there.

Pause.

Archer: Tell her to go—I don't care what she says, he won't put me there.

Pause.

Archer: Because he's dead. I heard it on the news, he's dead, dead. Knifed in Worcester two, three nights ago.

Pause.

Archer: Sure, you don't have to tell her why, just say I ain't going to plead, and without Ricetti she ain't got a case.

Pause.

Archer: Yeah, I'll be there. Two days before, at one in the afternoon, your office. And no, I won't plead.

Pause. Flopsy muttering something muffled that sounded like "a quickie before I pick up the kids at school."

Archer: I'll have your money then, sure.

Lori made notes, then ran fast through most of the rest of the

tapes, slowing one down to listen intently to a muffled and disjointed conversation between Archer and someone who arrived at a little before midnight. Archer called him Gonzo.

Archer: Your money, Gonzo, [inaudible] thousand.

Gonzo: It wasn't [inaudible] took a while, he [inaudible] a lot of grass, to soften him up.

Archer: [inaudible] stuff as a bonus. Keep out of sight for a couple of weeks.

Scuffling around the door.

Gonzo: Be in Boston till the [inaudible]. If you need anything, you know [inaudible].

Archer: So long.

Lori made more notes, and on the next tape picked up Archer's second call from Lewerke.

Archer: Yeah.

Pause.

Archer: Why bother me? No, I won't plead. Now don't call me again. Yeah, I'm sure he's dead, they had it in the Worcester paper.

Pause.

Archer: A friend called me, he knew about me and Ricetti.

Pause.

Archer: No, I don't know what day's paper.

Pause.

Archer: Eddie something, or maybe Andy something, I don't remember his last name. What's the problem?

Lewerke wasn't stupid, that's for sure. He didn't have to wait for Lori to tell him why she believed that Archer was behind Ricetti's death. Lori arranged with the chief deputy for the security of the tapes and more listening in a couple of days. She returned to her office and called McNamara in Worcester. "Is there any way that Ricetti's identity got out?" she asked him.

"None. It's still right here in my desk, ready to go."

"Do you have a local called Gonzo?"

"Yes. Gonzo Patreska. A bad one, hits for the drug trade to enforce payment."

"Freelance?"

"Some, but mostly on staff."

Lori pondered things. Then she said, "We have a tape that he's with our boy up here, and seems to be paid, but it's not really

clear. And the warrant might not hold up. But that's the way it is. You can focus on him."

"I'll let it out about Ricetti."

"I'll send out an affidavit when you put out the information on his identity. Change it as you like, then send it back right away, it'll help me with my guy."

Lori reached up and stretched. The pieces were in place. Now it was up to her to maneuver them. But first, a good night's rest.

Lori called Lewerke at ten A.M. the next day.

"I have some bad news for you, Don. I'm thinking of dropping the assault charges, and filing a murder charge."

"Did one of the men die?" He was keeping his cool.

"No. The witness, Ricetti, was killed the other night."

"Accidents happen."

Lori paused for several seconds.

"Tell me more," he said.

"It was murder. We have your boy paying off the killer."

"How so?"

"Gonzo Patreska, in Worcester. He was up here two nights ago."

"Have him how?"

"You'll find out at the arraignment."

"Is that it?"

"Your guy will find out what else when he sees the trial information."

"You're bluffing."

Lori sighed. She didn't want to move too fast. "I wanted to dispose of this, but Archer was sure he had it beaten. When he turned down my offer, he probably told you that Ricetti wouldn't testify against him. If he told you that, he knew that Ricetti was dead, but it hadn't been put out by the Worcester police. In fact, it wasn't released by them until last night. Maybe Archer didn't tell you that Ricetti was dead, but that's why he turned down the deal."

The silence at the other end of the line was very informative. Finally he said, "You're stretching, Lori."

"Ask him, if you're so sure. Then you'll be called as a witness to confirm what Archer knew—"

"Attorney-client privilege."

Lori licked her lips and steadied her harpoon. "He wasn't alone when he told you that Ricetti wouldn't testify and maybe that Ricetti was dead. That does away with the privilege. When you testify, and the cops bring in this Gonzo person, it'll make a fine, tight case."

"You're building a house of cards."

"All of the earlier offers are withdrawn. I'll take guilty pleas on the two charges, seven years on each, consecutive, no parole."

"Lori, be reasonable."

"You have until tomorrow at noon, otherwise I file the information for murder one, and ask for no bail. With his record, and considering the facts, he'll be in solitary, not even phone calls, until trial, which will be in about a year."

The line was silent for several seconds. Then Lewerke asked, "Why will you let the homicide charge go, if you think it's so strong?"

"You know what will happen. He'll be under the gun, literally, by Gonzo and his cronies, whether he beats the rap or not. Tomorrow, noon, Don. Goodbye."

Judge Robertson looked out over his half-moon glasses. He stated his intention to accept the plea bargain, went through the colloquy, recited into the record his conclusions that there was a factual basis for the two guilty pleas and that the defendant was aware of rights that he was freely and voluntarily giving up, and went through the immediate sentencing steps.

Lori stared at the shuffling Archer, leg irons and waistband shackles securely in place. She was satisfied that fourteen years of maximum security would at least protect the public from Archer's depredations during the felon's turbulent thirties and into his middle age, when she could hope that he and the demimonde that spawned him might be out of sync.

"We're finished," Lori said to her clerk, who hefted most of the files left over from the afternoon's business and returned to the office.

Judge Robertson rose and signaled to Lori that she should join him in his cramped chambers.

Lori walked past the courthouse personnel, who were milling around preparing to leave, and into the judge's chambers. She rested on one leg for several moments, then on the other, while the judge hung up his robe.

He stopped and stood, flat-footed, legs spread, hands on hips. "A neat piece of work, Miss Prewitt."

Lori ignored his old-fashioned form of address. "Thank you, Your Honor."

"What magic did you work to cause Lewerke to cave in so thoroughly?"

"We had the goods on him."

Judge Robertson shook his head and moved to stand in front of his desk chair. "No. But if that's your story, that's okay. I saw the eavesdropping warrant in the file."

Lori felt a thrill in her chest. She wouldn't have wanted that. But she realized that the clerk of court would have placed the warrant in the only court file open on Archer. She decided to say nothing.

"Your principal witness was dead, you blew a lot of smoke on a tired old judge to get him to issue a warrant of doubtful validity, and submitted a return on the warrant that was the essence of vagueness. The rest of the file, with the only eyewitness dead, isn't enough to get past a motion to dismiss after the state's evidence, and yet Lewerke comes in and rolls over for a long sentence. I might almost hear a habeas corpus proceeding coming this way, on the basis of inadequate lawyer representation."

Lori still said nothing.

"Not to worry," the judge said. He sank into his chair and formed a prayer clasp with his hands on the empty desk blotter. "Our little conversation about the defendant being satisfied with Lewerke's representation of him has taken care of that. You recall that I insisted that Archer read the file, and almost twisted his arm into admitting that he knew he was pleading guilty to charges with a flimsy case, and yet that he was satisfied with Lewerke, and didn't want to fight it. Neither one of them cracked. It's all on the record, just in case that habeas corpus lands on this desk."

Lori swallowed hard.

The judge leaned back and cupped his hands behind his head. He smiled, a friendly smile. "I was a prosecutor for twelve years before I took to defending, and then moved on to this job. What you did was the neatest job of railroading I've ever seen. And it couldn't have happened to a better defendant, or defense attorney. I'd rather not know the details, unless it moves beyond today and here."

"Your Honor, I-I-I—"

The judge held out his hands, palms open, fingers extended. He stood up. "I'm leaving. Justice takes many forms. I don't believe I've ever seen one with so many forms as this one. I'll see you next court service day." With an effortless motion, he was out the door in a moment.

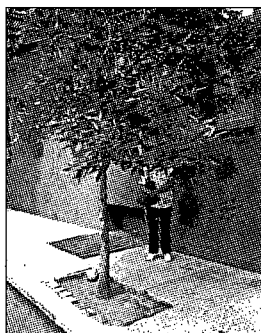
Lori waited for several seconds before she followed the judge out of the office and down the stairs. She went into the office of the county clerk and went to a stack of blank certificates to file as a candidate for office.

"You're going to go for it, huh?" asked the clerk.

"I just decided." 🐾

# THE STORY THAT WON

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Pamela Karavolos of Rosamond, California. Honorable mentions go to Donna Thomas of Maywood, Illinois; B. L. Whiting of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; Craig A. Doucette of East Hartford, Connecticut; Jose Roberto of El Cajon, California; W. B. Borrebach of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania; Kerry Chapman of Gray, Georgia; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina; and Wayne D. Coffey of Yakima, Washington.



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## THE STALKER

PAMELA KARAVOLOS

He glanced out the window, and there she was, just like she had been yesterday, and the day before. He was used to devoted fans. Heck, he'd grown up on devoted fans as a cute and chubby baby and a precocious toddler in commercials. As a teenage idol, he'd encouraged his fans' devotion.

Tommy looked out the window. She was still there. Watching. It was giving Tommy the creeps. He could call the police. But, he couldn't prove she was there watching him. She might be standing there for any number of reasons.

Tommy paced back and forth. He reached over and picked up the receiver. Calling the police would probably be the best course of action. But then, he got to thinking. He was in line for a role as a clean-cut, all-around nice guy on a soap opera. Now was not the time to have press that was anything but complimentary.

He knew without even looking that she was still there, motionless and watching, ever watching. It was freaking him out.

Tommy flung open the window and let out a stream of abuse that would have made any adoring fan blush. It worked. Tommy watched as the woman turned to walk away. Then, he noticed the slump of her shoulders and, in his mind's eye, he could see tears welling up in her eyes. If the press got wind of this, he could kiss that role goodbye.

"Wait," he shouted, "Mom! We'll have lunch. I'll call you!"

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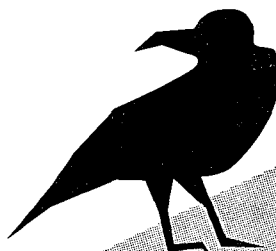
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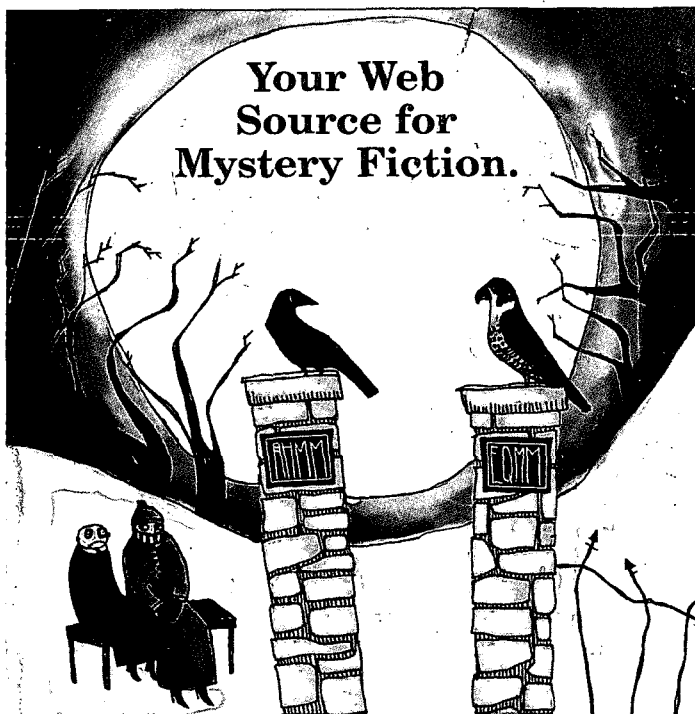
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